AM 0324609 Code I-E-2002287126

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Ayoni and other stories

translated and edited by
Alladi Uma
and
M Sridhar

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Ayoni

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and Other Stories

A Collection of Telugu Short Stories

Translated and edited by Alladi Uma and M Sridhar

StreeKatha

KATHA

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KATHA is a registered nonprofit society devoted to enhancing the pleasures of reading. KATHA VILASAM is its story research and resource centre.

Cover design: Oroon Das
Cover illustration: T Vaikuntam
In-house editors: Shoma Choudhury, Gita Rajan
Assistant editor: Anuradha Rajkumari

Typeset in 11 on 14.5pt ElegaGaramnd BT by Sandeep Kumar
at Katha and Printed at Usha Offset, New Delhi

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ISBN 81-87649-00-3

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

To the memory of Alladi Lakshmi (Uma's mother)
who would have been very happy
to see this book in print

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Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible but for the help of a number of people. First, we would like to thank the University of Hyderabad for providing us with a grant for this project. Professor R Srihari from the Department of Telugu, and Professors S Viswanathan, Sudhakar Marathe and Mohan Ramanan from the Department of English encouraged us throughout its duration. This project could not have taken shape without the cooperation of the writers or their copyright holders whom we would like to thank profusely at the very outset.

Our special thanks are due to those who gave a lot of their valuable time and innumerable suggestions and to those who gave us or helped us obtain material, especially to KK Ranganadhacharyulu, A Raghurama Raju, AK Prabhakara Rao, Indraganti Janakibala, Abburi Chaya Devi, Volga, Vallampati Venkatasubbaiah, Kethu Viswanathareddy, Bapuji and Shyam. A warm thanks to Bharago, who has gone out of his way to get permission for us from writers and whose enthusiasm for promoting Telugu literature is unquestionable, and to Subhan.

We would like to especially thank the following writers and copyright holders for giving us the permission to translate and publish the stories –

Visalandhra Publishing House, Hyderabad for allowing us to translate and publish Gurazada's "Matilda," Addepalli Vivekananda Devi and Vivekananda Press for Sripada Subrahmanyasastry's "Arikalla Kinda Mantalu," Sowris Pramoda for Chalam's "Argumentu," Bhanumati for Kanuparti Varalakshmamma's "Ottu," K Varudhini for Kodavatiganti Kutumbarao's "Chedipoyina Manishi," RUK Saastri and R Lakshmi Narayana Prasad for Rachakonda Viswanathasastry's "Viluvalu," Sivaraju Subbulakshmi for "Tellavarindi," Abburi Chaya Devi for "Bonsai Bratuku," Kethu Viswanathareddy for "Rekkalu," Kavanasarma for "Surpanakha Sokam," Ranganayakamma for "Dabbu," P Sathyavathi for "Tayilam," Indraganti Janakibala for "Jeevana Rajakeeyam," Vivina Murthy for "O Adugu," Volga for "Ayoni," Authors and Writers India Limited, for permitting us to reprint the translation of "Ayoni," and Kuppili Padma for "Masi Gudda."

Apart from personal collections and material given to us by friends and well-wishers, we must acknowledge the Vetapalem Library, the City Central Library, State Central Library, Hyderabad, Sundaraiah Library and Hyderabad University Library for their invaluable help.

Before our book took this form, we imposed the manuscript on many of our relatives and friends who unhesitatingly obliged us – our parents, chitti, chittappa, Hari chittappa, Sharmila and Bindu. No words can express our gratitude. Many of our friends and well-wishers kept egging us on not to give up our work halfway. Our special thanks to Suneetha and Sachi. It would be too embarrassing to name the other members of our families who have been with us and put up with our moods – how can we thank them!

Thanks to Jawahar for meeting our deadlines at short notice. His typing was so meticulous that we did not face any problem while proofreading.

Finally, we thank Katha for coming forward so readily to publish our translation.

Introduction

It is no accident that Gurazada Apparao's "Diddubatu," published in 1910 and considered the first short story in Telugu, concerns itself with the ingenuity of a woman in correcting the ways of her husband who had taken to another woman. It has a lot to do with the plight of women in that society and the need for social reform – abolition of child marriage, advocacy of widow remarriage and promotion of women's education. It is significant that every important writer after Gurazada, male or female, has continued to focus on the problems of women from his or her own point of view.

It may seem baffling that there had been very powerful voices, including some male ones, dealing with a wide range of women's issues much before feminism had taken root in the Telugu literary scene. However, when the attempts towards promotion of women, the various reform movements to improve their condition and the literature produced about their problems are all seen as part of a nationalist agenda to rope in women into the freedom struggle, this would appear perfectly logical. But one may want to question how far these attempts were really progressive and how far they were able to break away from stereotyped notions about women. That men had

already written about many aspects of women is often projected to suggest that there is not much that women writers had accomplished or could accomplish. But the fact remains that women's writing in Telugu has been most forceful in the 1980s and the 1990s.

In what sense have these women writers been more forceful? How did they represent themselves and their concerns? Were they focusing on certain issues that had not been dealt with by men or by the earlier women writers? How have the male writers responded to the new and emerging women's voices? Questions such as these prompted us to study the portrayal of women in the Telugu short story from Gurazada to the present. These translations allow us to re-present women as we have understood them.

We would like to emphasize that these short stories are representative of the various issues concerning women. What each of these writers consider as women's problems and what these stories portray may vary considerably from our own perceptions of those questions. We have, therefore, made an effort to include stories which present a range of women's issues from different perspectives. In the process, we may have been forced to leave out many significant stories and writers who had written about other issues. We have tried to restrain ourselves, as far as possible, from including stories which have already been translated, in an attempt to introduce newer ones to non-Telugu readers.

We have also tried to choose representative samples with an eye on the short story as a literary form in Telugu. In this context, we wanted to include a translation of Chaganti Somayajulu's "Badilee," one of the earliest short stories which brought out powerfully the yearnings of a young woman through her letters. Unfortunately, we had to leave out this significant male writer using a very interesting mode as we were unable to get permission. Ultimately, any selection is based on individual preferences, as our own has been.

In Gurazada's "Matilda" and Sripada Subrahmanyasastry's "Walking on Hot Coals" we have two women who hardly speak. While "Matilda" deals with the plight of a beautiful, young woman caught between the man she is married to, a man much older than herself who controls every movement of hers, and the prying gazes of every passerby, Sripada's story is about the silent suffering of a child widow in a traditional brahmin household and her attempts to overcome it. It must have been shocking for the audience of Chalam's time to see him, a male writer, argue for women's right over their bodies in his piece "Argument." Chalam does this so forcefully that quite a few Telugu feminist writers today trace their direct line of descent from him. The travails of a woman who succeeds, in the end, in making her husband realize the consequences of his foolish dictats are brilliantly captured in Kanuparti Varalakshmamma's "The Promise." While Sivaraju Subbulakshmi describes the economic dependence of a woman in "It has Dawned," Kutumbarao shows how economic independence is the first step towards a woman's freedom through his "Immoral Person."

Rachakonda Viswanathasastry's "Values" questions the values of a man who fixes a price on the pleasure he gets from a prostitute. Ranganayakamma caricatures the figure of a dowry-drunk man and examines the economic aspect of the dowry system in "Money." Vivina Murthy's "One Step" juxtaposes the traditional procedure of the boy "seeing" a girl prior to the fixing up of their marriage with the boy's "modern" notions in expecting his wife-to-be to write letters to him, regardless of the girl's own ideas in the matter. What is interesting about the story is the way the girl reacts to these ideas of modernity. In Volga's "Ayoni," a child who has been dragged into prostitution, dreams of desexing herself to fight her sexual exploitation. While the stunted growth of the woman becomes the focus of Abburi Chaya Devi's "Bonsai Life," Kuppili Padma's "Sooty Kitchen Rag" deals with the

presumption that a mother is not suitable for any intellectual activity. P Sathyavathi's protagonist in "The Incentive," a mere shadow of her husband who works for a big private company, discovers her lost self. In "Wings," Kethu Viswanathareddy outlines the problems of a working woman, especially when she takes up a job traditionally associated with men. Indraganti Janakibala highlights this once again in "Politics of Living" showing how a male dominated society turns a minor oversight of a working woman into a reason for her dismissal from service. Kavanasarma contemporizes and re-views the story of Ramayana from Surpanakha's point of view in "Surpanakha's Sorrow."

Though the short story is a very powerful genre in Telugu literature, its formal strength has not received the critical attention it deserves. Talking of styles and forms, Sripada's story is amazing in that it employs women's silences to very good effect – silences that have been recognized as significant in feminist literary theory many years later. The short story employs conversation (and is almost like a play but for the stage directions) to reinforce the effect of the silent responses of the child widow. Chalam's "Argument" is entirely in a woman's voice – that of the protagonist. Rachakonda Viswanathasastry writes a whole short story in the form of a poem. A mixing of the generic boundaries of this kind must have been revolutionary in 1950, the year this was written. Vivina Murthy's "One Step" is different in that it intersperses letters in the narrative. Kavanasarma turns a familiar myth upside down, thus creating a possibility of viewing Rama's story from a woman's and a Dravidian's point of view. Storytelling gets a new dimension when a woman speaks, and Volga makes a girl child, who has been dragged into the flesh trade, tell us her story in a radically different way. The compelling necessity of this girl to tell an altogether different story from the one she wanted to write when she was younger is inextricably linked, as much to the conditions that have necessitated the new story, as to her desire to depart from familiar modes of

storytelling. Abburi Chaya Devi questions our notions of art, and of a woman as a decorative piece, through her employment of the metaphor of bonsai for the life of a woman. She wants us to perceive the stunted growth of the woman in a cramped space. Kuppili Padma goes a step further by using the metaphor of the dirty kitchen rag to represent the use-and-throw status of the woman.

Talking about the differences in the portrayal of women by men and women, we would like to state here that we have chosen only those male writers who have made an attempt to understand the problems of women, albeit from their own standpoint. When a Sripada writes about the mute suffering of a child widow, when a Chalam defends the decision of a mother to abort her child, when a Kutumbarao argues for a woman's economic independence, it may appear as if there is nothing left for the women writers to achieve. Such a tradition of male writing about women does put tremendous pressure on the creative resources of women writers. But when women seriously attempt to respond to this challenge, they write themselves into fiction somewhat differently from men. Thus an Abburi Chaya Devi re-views the familiar way of looking at the bonsai as a purely decorative art and instead views it as suggestive of a mode of confining women's free and natural growth in a cramped and protected space. When women start realizing their own condition, they try to represent it in images hitherto unknown and metaphors which come from their own immediate experiences. It is thus that, for a Kuppili Padma, the kitchen rag becomes synonymous not only with the immensely useful figure of the mother but also with the mother who is generally excluded from all intellectual activity at home. But can women writers write something so close to themselves that no male writer, however empathetic to the women's cause, can hope to write? Can we imagine, for instance, a story like "Ayoni" being written by a male writer? Perhaps not. Perhaps yes. It is difficult to say, for it raises a host of other

related questions. Can a non-dalit write like a dalit? Can a non-Muslim write like a Muslim? If we extend the question further, we may find ourselves in the extreme position of asking whether one individual can write like another. Alternately, we wonder whether it would be better to think of a writer as being both an individual and a part of many communities.

We leave our readers to decide for themselves.

October 2001 Alladi Uma and M Sridhar

Gurazada Apparao

Matilda

When I was studying for my MA Botany exams, I lived in a double storeyed house on a big street in Mylapore along with some ten or twelve students from my home state of Andhra.

Three days after my arrival, Ramarao beckoned me and whispered, "Have you seen Matilda?" When I said No, he pointed her out to me, saying, "Look at her, but don't make it obvious."

I looked.

"That's enough. Come on now," he said.

Without turning my head I said, "How can I come away? Isn't this why God has given us eyes? In this beautiful world created by Him, the most attractive and fascinating thing is a beautiful woman. When my thoughts are not evil, what's wrong with looking?"

"I've seen a number of people who indulge in such moralistic talk. Since you are new I thought it better you knew – so I showed her to you. Don't ever look in that direction again."

Ramarao caught me by the shoulder and dragged me away.

"Is she a good woman or a bad one?" I asked.

"How does it matter to us? What's so good about us that we can say someone is not good? By the way, if you ever get the urge to look at

Matilda and do so, that'll be the end of our friendship," he warned. Ramarao was my best friend. So what could I do? I controlled my feelings and for a few days didn't go to the terrace facing Matilda's backyard.

Ah, the beauty of her face, her body shining golden after a bath with turmeric paste, her hair spread like peacock feathers, the sparkle in her eyes when she glanced around occasionally while drawing water from the well … all these remained with me. Even though I tried hard to forget her, I could not.

I was on tenterhooks for over a week. After that, unable to control myself any longer, I paced up and down the terrace whenever Ramarao wasn't around, pretending to read a book, my eyes fixed in the direction of her backyard. But she would come out only twice, darting back like a flash of lightning.

Every day, on my way to college, I slowed my pace to an ant-like crawl in front of Matilda's house, my eyes fixed on her door. Now and then she appeared on the threshold, like a picture in a frame.

I learnt about Matilda's life from a few people whom I asked, and from my friends, whom I did not.

My friends called her husband a tiger, an old tiger. He was not all that old, perhaps fifty five or fifty six. He was short, reasonably fair, with large eyes, thick moustache and a pockmarked face. He had moved into the adjoining house two years ago. Nobody knew where he had come from or why. Their house had a large room facing the street. This room jutted out into the front yard and had three cupboards full of books. The Tiger was always seen reading or writing. He maintained the most beautiful flowerbeds both in his front and back yards and was seen tending his plants every morning and evening. Matilda watered them. This British style exercise was enough for the

two of them. That was it. They never stepped out of the house. No relative or neighbour ever visited them.

The Tiger imposed a lot of restrictions on Matilda. She was not to come to the doorstep. That, it seemed, was an order. But she would come out once in a while anyway. One could notice a kind of anxiety on her face. What was so surprising about that? The husband kept watch over her. The husband's sister was an old woman who, no doubt, created further misunderstandings between them. The only other person in the house was an old brahmin cook.

People knew Matilda's husband only as the Tiger. Nobody knew his real name. Apparently, the postman had been ordered not to show anyone the address on the letters he received. People were inclined to feel that only the postmaster and the Tiger really knew each other.

Perhaps all this was done to maintain secrecy.

One day, on my way to college, hair freshly washed and tousled, a cap worn at a rakish angle, clothes white like jasmine, I was sauntering past Matilda's house. When I came near her doorstep, I saw her outside and stood staring at her. For half a minute perhaps. Instantly, the Tiger jumped out of his lair and roared, "Young man, come here." He would surely kick me, I thought, and all my instincts told me to flee. But if I did that he would not only assume that I was guilty but that Matilda was too. So, I went in, thinking no matter what happened to me, I would save her.

The Tiger took me to his library. He slumped into his chair and fixing me with a baleful look, asked me in English, "Were you looking at my wife?"

"I was looking at your library which is visible through the window and wondering what kind of a person you are and what you do."

"Didn't you look at my wife?"

"I did. If someone was right in front of you, you would be bound to see her, wouldn't you? That's all."

The Tiger called out to Matilda in a thundering voice, but she didn't come. "Will you come here or not, you bitch?" he shouted. She came in slowly, and with her head bent, stood in front of him, quivering.

He spoke to me in English again, "You idiot! Look! Look at this bitch's face as long as you want! Why, why do you look at me and not at her? Is my face better than hers?"

I didn't speak. Seeing that the situation was getting completely out of hand I tried to escape towards the door but the Tiger guessed my intentions and said, "Wait."

I stopped.

The eyes that had spat fire a minute ago, cooled. "Young man!" he said, "Have you ever learned to speak the truth? From your parents or from your teachers?"

I thought of my parents. "There's no need to teach me honesty. I was born with it," I said.

"So, let's see the honesty you've inherited. Tell me, is my wife beautiful or not?"

"I think she is."

"Do you have any doubts?"

"No."

"When you walk by every day, don't you turn and look for her?"

"Because you have asked me to speak the truth, I have to confess that I do, but as God is my witness, I have not even an iota of evil thought."

"That's all right, but you are happy to see her, aren't you? That's the truth?"

"Yes."

"Then, take this bitch with you, I have donated her to you. Take her away! I'll rid myself of this trash!"

I left without a word. I couldn't see the house or its people. I just stood outside, humiliated, abusing myself. I thought of leaving and never setting my eyes on that street again. I decided I would move out.

In my mind's eye I will always see Matilda as she looked when I left her – head bent, tears streaming down her cheeks, her breasts heaving with suppressed sobs. An image no poet has ever been able to recreate – such immense, endless sorrow, such peerless beauty.

I had just reached my doorstep when the old brahmin from the Tiger's house walked silently up to me, placed a note in my hand, and slipped away. Assuming that this had something to do with the episode that had just taken place, I went to my room, bolted the door and read the note, eager to know what was in it.

In a neat handwriting it said,

> Won't you and your friends let me live in peace with my husband? What harm have I done you? If you don't bother me, I'll survive. Leave me to my fate.

What could I do? I thought that if I went away to live somewhere else my problem would be solved. But how could I go away now without fulfilling Matilda's request? Shouldn't I rescue her from the problems that my friends were likely to cause her?

What was the purpose of my life if I couldn't save Matilda? What was the use of my manliness? Did I have just an incidental role to play in the sorrow-filled story of this gem of a woman? If I could relieve this woman of her sorrow and win her heart, my life would be fulfilled. Was this beautiful handwriting Matilda's? What a lucky man I was. Wouldn't I do anything she asked me to? If I owned the three worlds and if she wrote asking me to give them to her, wouldn't I do just that?

What was I to do next? I was not very worldly-wise. Trying to create a Vinayaka, I could end up creating a monkey. Ramarao was a

man of experience, a virtuous man, a clever man. I didn't care if he abused me for not listening to him. I would fall at his feet and ask him to help me in this great task.

Thinking thus, I recounted the entire incident to Ramarao. Then I told him what I had decided. I pleaded with him not to try to change my mind.

Ramarao said, "If I had the confidence that I could change your mind, I would try to do so. I know you won't change your mind. Did you stop looking at her when I asked you to? But if I don't tell you what I think or what I know, I would be a culprit. I would be a man who has betrayed his friendship. One, our elders order us not to get involved in fights between husband and wife. They are irresolvable, inscrutable. Even though mediators try to settle the problems of a couple they only worsen the situation. Two, however much we may label the man a tiger, the poor tiger only growls, he doesn't bite. Did you ever hear of him beating Matilda at any time? No. She has no dearth of food or clothes. If she listens to him, their life will go on smoothly. Three, you're greatly attracted to Matilda. That's wrong. You may ask what's wrong if you have no evil thoughts. An evil thought comes unannounced. It needn't come from elsewhere. It enters your heart slyly, unobserved, and peeps out. Knowing it's there, we try to ignore it, we do things openly to make it come out. But don't you need something to spur an evil thought? People who are alone in the forests have no evil thoughts about women. The test is, whether, given an opportunity, the man who secretly desires an attractive woman, has an evil thought or not. He who does not give a chance for that to happen is wise."

A few days later, as I was stepping out of my house, I bumped into the Tiger.

"You and your friend Ramarao have done me a great favour. Your

words and behaviour have made me realize that my wife is a virtuous woman. Thinking about what you said that day, I have relaxed my grip on her. My wife is a very good woman. She hasn't misused the freedom I have given her. I told her to go wherever she liked. I asked her to meet whoever she wanted to. But she doesn't want to go anywhere. She doesn't want to see anyone. My world is with you, why do I need anyone? she says. You've liberated her. And helped free me from my own prison. Have you studied higher mathematics? Even if you haven't, it doesn't matter."

He invited me to his house and rang the bell. Matilda came out, like a mechanical doll, and stood at the doorstep.

"Serve us coffee."

She placed two cups of coffee on the table.

"Please serve yourself too," I said.

She looked at her husband as if to ask whether this was right.

"It's all right, have some coffee with us, he's our friend," he said. But she didn't serve herself and simply stood by his side.

"Doesn't matter. Sit down," he said. She kept standing.

I was happy at the new understanding between husband and wife and praised myself for the small role I played in bringing it about.

As he drank his coffee, the Tiger spoke about teaching his wife to read, about how she always read the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. He mentioned that he had taken Matilda out to such and such place and that it had pleased her very much. Then he asked me a few questions about my studies. I realized he was a learned man.

Before I left, he said, "Now you can go."

"Matilda" was first published posthumously. This version has been translated from *Gurazada Rachanalu: Kathanikalu,* Visalandhra Publishing House, Hyderabad, 1995 (1984).

Sripada Subrahmanyasastry

Walking on Hot Coals

Instead of just sitting there like a log, why don't you make some sandalwood paste? Do I have to remind you every day?"

"But didn't Pedda Baava leave yesterday, Ammamma?"

"Can't you see there are others too who need sandalwood paste?"

"Okay, so what's wrong with reminding me?"

"Your amma and nanna – do I have to spell out everything?"

"How else can a person like me know?"

"Why do these things never occur to you, by yourself? Are they so old and in the last stage of their lives? Why shouldn't they use sandal paste?"

"..."

"Anyway, there's no way you'll have *that* fortune in this lifetime ... If you want to lead a happy life in your next birth at least, you'll have to do things like making sandal paste and stringing jasmine garlands for women who are happily married – especially for the one who has given birth to you. What could be more virtuous than that?"

"How would I know the pleasure that comes from applying sandal paste to know what virtue is gained by making others experience such pleasure? I've experienced so much in this birth that I'm worried I won't find any happiness in my next either. I'm alive only because I'm

unable to kill myself. Anyway, how can I be sure I'll be born a human being in my next birth?"

"True. How can you, a stupid woman with such views, be born a human being even if you wished to?"

"What was the point in being born a human being? It would've been better to be born an animal or a bird. This, my fate, my life ..."

"Who knows whom you were jealous of in your previous birth, whose pleasure you destroyed, whose separation you were responsible for? Or else, why would you have been fated to suffer like this? When I ask you to take care of your next birth, it's for your sake I say it. I'm not saying it for myself, am I?"

"Did I say it's for your sake? For whomsoever it may be, I can't escape it, can I? You only asked me to make the sandalwood paste for your kooturu because you love me, right? Who says it's wrong? It didn't occur to me to do it but did I say that I won't? Won't I do it? Now that you have, clearly and firmly, told me, feel free to question me if I miss doing it a single day, starting today. How can I simply eat and sit around doing nothing? Haven't I the strength in my arms?"

"Curse you. For the one word I uttered, you have reeled off so much!"

" "

"When you are so unwilling to do anything for your own parents, what would you do for others?"

"..."

"Yes. When your pedda baava was here for a week you made the sandalwood paste, but you were always making a face or crying! You heated some water for his bath! That's all you did, isn't it? Doesn't doing things for a brahmin, who has studied the vedas, amount to doing things for God?"

"All those things are for the fortunate. Not for me. For my wretched life, god or man, it's all the same. The same even if it were a devil. I've

always done whatever I could for everybody – whenever I was told to do it or when it struck me. I've not saved my body from hard work."

"Who would allow you to even if you so wished?"

"Are you allowing me to? Or have I begged you to allow me? There's the buffalo in the backyard and then there's me, here, inside the house – the whole household …"

"You shameless woman! How can you compare yourself to a buffalo who gives birth and raises its own kind? Do you wish to bear children, you wretch?"

"…"

"You brought in poverty along with your birth! How could you be so fortunate?"

"…"

"In what inauspicious moment were you born? Your amma nearly died giving birth to you. Your own life has been ruined like this. Your nanna too lost his job."

"Why don't you add that the boy who tied the wedding knot with me died too? Why, why don't you say that?"

"You … why are you taunting me for not saying it? If he had not married you, the poor fellow would have survived. He was in the third form when he was only sixteen. Who knows how highly placed he would have been in his job? Why do you hate a dead man, saying He's dead, He's dead?"

"…"

"Tying the wedding knot with you proved unlucky for him."

"…"

"You stepped into their house … An only son, the mother was heartbroken."

"…"

"It's good he died. Would you have lived with him if he had survived? Even if you had lived with him, would you have given him

food? And even if you had given him food, would you have allowed him to sleep?"

"And if I had let him sleep, I'd surely have strangled him …"

"What? What did you say? How headstrong you have become!"

"…"

"You are the kind who would have done all that. Do you hear? You're capable of doing anything."

"…"

"The man you had married is dead and has gone to heaven …"

"Having married me, how could he have gone to heaven?"

"Yes. That's really true. What a clever woman you've turned out to be! You and your wretched birth in this house, not even fortunate enough to receive maintenance …"

"Maintenance? Why do I need maintenance? Why do I need any money? I was born to slog. I'll slog for whoever wants me to … Won't those who make me slog give me some gruel? Even if they do it only to make sure I slog some more …"

"Slog on then. Slog till you rot."

"Why only till I rot? I'll slog till I die. I'm slogging now, can't you see?"

"Why can't I see when it's so obvious? Am I blind? Maybe you think I've lost my sight like your nayanamma, your nanna's mother. I won't lose my eyes so easily. It's those who keep telling me so, who'll lose them. They'll be destroyed … you have the audacity, do you, to oppose me, the same person into whose hands you were born and who has brought you up? You dare oppose me! How can you survive after opposing me?"

"It's only if I wished to die that I would dare oppose you. It would do you a lot of good."

"What did you say? What are you blabbering? You think I'll poison you? Why are you saying such atrocious things, you wintry scorpion, you corpse of a widow?"

"..."

"How you sting, you wretched woman!"

"..."

"Well, die if you must, but if you don't get the paste ready by the time I get up from my nap, see what I'll do to you. Plague on you!"

"..."

"I'll squash you under my feet, but I won't let you die."

"..."

"My dear, will you do me a small favour?"

"Why do you even need to ask, Akka?"

"Then say you'll do it."

"How does the question of not doing arise? Do I do everything only after announcing that I'll do it?"

"Here's the cloth, you have to stitch a blouse for me. That's all."

"Okay ..."

"By the time it's dark, do you understand?"

"It won't be possible today ... tomorrow ..."

"Why, what are you doing today?"

"Peddakka's given me some cloth and asked me to stitch a jubba for her daughter after lunch. After I've finished what I'm doing now, I have to first finish that ..."

"All right, forget it."

"Why are you so touchy?"

"It's nothing ..."

"I didn't say I wouldn't stitch it. Anyway, it's up to you."

"Should you speak like that? Anyway it's your wish, not mine. If it were my wish you wouldn't postpone it."

"Have you thought of what *she* would say if I postponed what I had undertaken earlier?"

"Why, will she beat you?"

"..."

"Will it be past the muhurtam of her kooturu's marriage?"

"..."

"Actually, you like your peddakka. You think I don't know that? Why do you always beat around the bush rather than tell me straight?"

"Why do you taunt me with harsh words? Don't you see my plight?"

"What plight? You don't even have to cook, do you?"

"I'd prefer cooking. Once you wear the madi sari, you can escape doing so many things."

"What do you have to do now except clean some Bengal gram?"

"Call this some?"

"Four kunchams. Isn't that all?"

"Do you know what time it is now?"

"Isn't it two? You'll be finished by three. After that?"

"In one hour?"

"All right. By four. What'll you do after that?"

"Who do you think has to make the sandalwood paste?"

"For whom? Baava left yesterday, didn't he?

"For Amma and Nanna."

"Did Amma want you to make it?"

"Not Amma. Ammamma."

"Why?"

"What do you mean Why?"

"Why did Ammamma ask you to make it?"

"What's wrong with that? Don't loving ammas get people to do things for their beloved kooturus?"

"All right, all right ... That should take half an hour."

Madi or ritual purity is a rigidly maintained tradition by orthodox brahmin families. The women wear wet clothes after a bath and keep away from others to observe purity and cleanliness till cooking is completed.

"Half an hour?"

"An hour at the most. And then?"

"If nothing else comes up, I have to stitch Peddakka's daughter's jubba ..."

"Whatever I say you come back to the same thing. You don't seem to know how to please. Your baava will be back tomorrow or the day after. He brought this when he'd come a month ago. Should you not stitch it at least before his next visit."

"Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"I remembered only now. Anyway, it's only an hour's work, how many days' notice do you require for such a monumental task? If you really put your mind to it, it'll be done in half an hour ... Stitch it please. What do you say, Chelli?"

"Haven't I said I would do it?"

"Do it first ... Right?"

"It makes no difference to me which I do first but can you ensure that Peddakka won't get angry?"

"Do what you wish. You behave like this whenever I ask you to do something. You have a special liking for your peddakka. You and she can go and drown yourselves in the Godavari! When I ask you to do a small thing like stitching a blouse! Maybe you think I can't do it myself. So much for hoping you wouldn't mind doing me a small favour ... Anyway, will you do it by tomorrow evening?"

"All right.

"If you can, try and finish it by tomorrow morning. I had thought of going to Papasodamma's in-laws' house wearing the new sari – this blouse will go well with it, don't you think so, Chelli?"

"First I've to wash Chelli's hair, comb Tammudu's hair, then wash Peddakka's kooturu's bedclothes ..."

"How long will all that take?"

"And the calf shed?"

"You'll clean that too, I suppose."

"And the milking?"

"Milking too. You'll put it on the stove. You'll make butter. You'll wash Nanna's dhoti and put it out to dry. Isn't that all? What else?"

"Why should you worry? I'll take care of everything."

"Don't just say you'll try, say you'll do it."

"Do you think I'll do it only if I say so? Does it mean that I won't, if I don't?"

"You're trying to be saucy now!"

"..."

"How hard-hearted you are, tallee."

"..."

"Even when I plead ... So, you'll definitely stitch it by tomorrow evening?"

"I will."

"Don't forget. After lunch, I'll sleep next to you. The wretched heat is too much, unless I sleep after lunch ...Will you finish stitching it by the time I get up?"

"..."

"Your baava will really appreciate it. When we find a job, you can come and stay with us. Will you stay with us?"

"..."

"Why don't you reply?"

"What's there to say? How else will I pass my days, if I don't stay with someone or the other?"

"How can you say such a thing, you wretched woman? Why do you treat me so shabbily? Do you think I can't manage if you don't come? We'll employ a cook and we won't need anyone else's help."

"..."

"Because you're my sibling ... because you're a helpless woman ...

If you don't stitch the blouse tomorrow, I'll complain to Ammamma. What do you think of yourself?"

"..."

"Oh! If someone speaks to you, you're all tears. You can't scare me with that."

"..."

"How's the jubba coming along ... What's the sandalwood paste for?"

"To smear on."

"You? Whom for ...?"

"Amma ..."

"What? Since when does Amma ...?"

"I don't know since when or till when, I don't need to know. If you want to, ask Ammamma ..."

"Did she ask you to make it?"

"Yes."

"Okay, why should I bother about all that ... tell me, have you stitched at least half the jubba?"

"I've finished cutting it."

"Great! Even after my giving it to you at eleven thirty, you've only just finished cutting it?"

"At least for doing that much ..."

"So are you asking me to be happy with that? Do you find my work a joke?"

"..."

"Why do you look at me like that? If your ego is hurt by such a small thing, why did you stop your work midway?"

"Oh God! How can someone like me have an ego? I've to accept any work, given by anyone, otherwise ... "

"Who else has given you work?"

"The moment you left, a plate of Bengal grams – four kunchams of it – came my way and is weighing me down."

"So?"

"So? I was almost dead completing the job. And now I'm sitting at the sandalwood stone."

"After this?"

"..."

"Rotate it four times and the vessel will be filled. After that?"

"For now, all I see myself doing is your kooturu's jubba. If nothing else comes up, I'll definitely do it."

"Do it. *Definitely*. How long will it take? Escape to the terrace and sit there without anybody knowing where you are. You'll get a wonderful breeze from the Godavari."

"I don't need to go to the terrace for the breeze. I can get it where I am."

"Well, it's up to you. I said it only for your comfort. All I want is that the jubba should be stitched. By the way, what did your chinnakka want?"

"She wants me to stitch her blouse."

"Can't she do it herself?"

" "

"Is her great husband coming?"

"..."

"Did she have to give it the moment I did?"

"..."

"Was hers torn?"

"..."

"Now don't look so shocked. You think I don't know you? You have a misplaced affection for her. So you have set aside my work, which I gave you earlier, and taken up hers."

"Without even knowing the full facts ..."

"I don't have to know. I have noticed it a million times before. Just because her husband has an English education … he won't complete his BA for another four years … and that too if he doesn't fail in between! Your baava told me so a number of times. Only if he completes his BA … Even if he does, it's of no use these days …"

"Why don't you listen to what I'm saying …"

"Is there anything more to be said? Don't you think I know at least this much? You go overboard doing things for her. She won't do anything more for you than I would."

"…"

"You don't seem to be able to distinguish who is better … an infant or a woman who lives like a palm tree."

"…"

"That you, her pinni, would stitch the cloth brought by her nanna … look, just see for yourself, how hopefully my little jewel is looking at you."

"What's the point of looking at a helpless, lifeless pinni? Tallee, my tallee, why do you depend on me? What am I, compared to your amma? I'll stitch the jubba for you. I'll skip my meal to stitch it, all right?"

"Children cling to people who pay them attention. If only you thought of my kooturu as your own! How many people in your situation have discovered happiness looking after their sister's children …"

"…"

"I don't know how to use insincere words like Chinnakka … How much affection I have for you … How can I talk about it? If you come to our house, won't I drive out my sister-in-law in minutes? Won't I let you run my house?"

"…"

"Seeing you toil … If you looked after my kooturu, would I ask you to do anything else?"

"..."

"You know that Madhavaswami temple near our house? Every day you can go there and listen to mythological stories. What more would you want? A fistful of food and a yard of cloth ... Will I deprive you of even these? Your baava will entrust the keys of the household to you ... If he travels for a month, he'll earn a huge amount. Rituals, poojas, Kasi, Rameswaram. Oh! What will you lack in our house?"

"..."

"You may be excited about going with Chinnakka, but she won't take you with her. She is a corpse as tall as a camel. Will she even feed you? In any case what can she feed you? She may utter Pass, Peace in English but does she have land? Only two acres. And dry land at that. Ours is ten acres of wetland under the lake. As for her husband ... You shouldn't stay at that place."

"..."

"You're a woman who knows the world, not an infant. Think well."

"..."

"Don't you tell all this to your chinnakka! Of course that quarrelsome corpse can't do anything to me ... But even so ..."

"..."

"Don't tell her."

"All right."

"I'll go visit Sundaramma's house. As soon as this is over you'll stitch the jubba, won't you?"

"..."

"Why don't you speak?"

"Go. Visit her."

"By the time we come back, your pinni would've stitched your jubba. You can wear it immediately. Tonight, you can sleep in her bed. Comfortably ..."

"..."

"Are you here? Good I've caught you."

"The vessel with the sandalwood paste will slip. Get away, get away."

"It won't slip, okay? I'm standing at a distance … all right?"

"Yes."

"Shall I help you?"

"No, it's almost done. If I do it one more time, the vessel will be full."

"Okay, then get up, Akka …"

"Why?"

"I have work."

"What work?"

"Will you do me a favour, a great favour?"

"Tell me what it is."

"Promise you'll do it."

"Tell me first."

"Will you do it, if I tell you what it is?"

"If it's something I can, I will."

"See, my mouth's watering."

"Have you bought something?"

"Where's the money?"

"You could have asked Amma."

"I did. And she said she would give it to me and was about to when that bitch of an Ammamma …"

"Don't abuse her like that. That's wrong. "

"Then … then why does she stop those who give? If I had the money, how nice it would be to play that potluck game."

"Who all are playing?"

"Venkata Subbulu, Buchamma, Lakshmi Rajyam and that bitch Gaviri."

"Very bad! Why are you becoming like this?"

"What's the point in going without money?"

"What did the others bring?"

"Subbulu brought money and spicy chenna dal, Buchamma brought money and groundnuts, Rajyam brought a huge piece of coconut."

"Oh! Is that so!"

"They asked me to bring money and a piece of jaggery."

"Why do you have to buy it? Ask Amma, she'll surely give you some."

"Why don't you give it to me?"

"I am not supposed to."

"So you won't?"

"Listen to me first. Stand a little away from me."

"Then I'll cry. Don't you know me?"

"..."

"Or I'll abuse you."

"Whatever you do, I won't give it to you. I'm not supposed to."

"There's no one in the kitchen. Everyone is outside. I can't reach the latch. Otherwise I would've taken it myself."

"..."

"You won't give it to me?"

"No."

"I'll only ask you thrice."

"..."

"I'll begin now."

"..."

"You won't give it to me? You won't? You won't?"

"..."

"I'll ask you once more. Will you give it to me or not?"

"..."

"Okay, don't say a thing. Is this how you behave ..."

"No! No! Ei, don't touch the vessel with the sandalwood paste! Shall I tell Ammamma?"

"Tell her … Tell her … So you'll tell her, will you?"

"Oh God! Oh God! She's spilt all the sandalwood paste ! Oh God, as it is, my hands are aching terribly. Not even a drop can be used. Oh God!"

"Cry away. Sit there like that! What, did you think? That I'd keep quiet if you teased me?"

"…"

"What are you doing, Rukku?"

"I've just sat down to stitch a jubba for Peddakka's daughter, after putting away the sandalwood paste."

"What's the hurry?"

"Everyone thinks their work is the most important. She was here just a moment ago pulling a long face because I hadn't done her job."

"She's always ready to get things free of charge. What is she doing?"

"I didn't ask."

"Don't. Just dump it inside and come."

"For what?"

"I'll tell you. First throw it there and come."

"I will. Tell me."

"Ammamma's body is aching terribly from frying Bengal gram."

"Is that so?"

"Your nanna is asking me to wash his hair. He says that nobody else can do it."

"Is that so?"

"Ammamma seems to have made herself some upma."

"…"

"You have to cool."

"…"

"Why, why are you looking so stunned?"

"…"

"Only for today. I will wear the madi sari tomorrow."

"My arms are aching horribly. I have cleaned the Bengal gram and then prepared the sandalwood paste twice."

"Two times or three times? Why are you instigating her?"

"..."

"It's not merely sitting in front of the stove, you will have to grind, pound."

"..."

"Put the raw banana in the dal and make sambar with brinjal, drumsticks, the skin of jackfruit and lady's fingers."

"Why don't you ask Peddakka or Chinnakka to cook?"

"Why should they? If we make them work, their husbands might get angry. What will their mothers-in-law say?"

"..."

"Everybody is important in their own way. If we've something to give, we should feed others. If we don't we should send them away, but we shouldn't assign work to them."

"..."

"It's six already. Get up. Don't sit. Your nanna wants food early. Throw that towel. What are you sitting for?"

"..."

"There must be mango chutney to go with last night's food, okay? Ask Ammamma how many mangoes should be used."

"..."

"By the way, there's not even a small piece of firewood in the hearth. Go up to the little attic, take out enough for four times and keep it ready. Do it before it gets dark. Don't forget."

"..."

"If Ammamma wants to make hard roti for herself, break a coconut and cut it into pieces. And for the chutney ... are you listening?"

"..."

"Up, get up. Don't just sit ..."

"Oh Rama! Should my life go on like this, Rama?"

"Ei, who's that in the kitchen?"

"It's me, Tammudu."

"Serve me food. Right now."

"..."

"Answer me. It's getting late for the cinema. You have to serve me fast."

"If you're in such a hurry, what ..."

"It's terribly urgent. Shall I get my plate or will you serve me on a leaf?"

"What were you doing till now?"

"Don't I have to find the money?"

"Are you looking for money now?"

"I've been asking for it since morning. Amma agreed to give me some only at three, but that wretched Ammamma ..."

"What, what?"

"How can I keep quiet when she tries to prevent me from getting money?"

"..."

"Why are you standing like that without serving me?"

"I haven't even added the rice to the boiling water."

"What were you doing till now? If I go to the late night show, my stupid studies will be affected. At least put the rice on now."

"Shouldn't I wait for the water to boil?"

"You're so stupid. What am I supposed to do now?"

"There is some leftover rice. Will you have it?"

"What a suggestion! Oh, all right ..."

"Ask Chinnakka or Peddakka to serve you."

"They said they can't come. It seems they don't have the time."

"What are they doing?"

"Chinnakka is stringing jasmine flowers. Peddakka is playing a game of shells with Syamalamba in the house opposite ours. You have to serve me."

"I'm not supposed to touch it."

"Then don't, you wretch. You and your stupid conventions."

"..."

"All right, stay awake till ten thirty."

"Ammamma's had her bath. Ask her to serve you."

"I don't want to."

"Why not?"

"If she casts her evil eye on the food, I won't be able to digest it."

"..."

"Keep some jackfruit, and drumstick pieces for me. Otherwise I'll beat you."

"Why have you worn madi today, Amma?"

"Amma asked me to wear it, Nanna."

"What's Peddakka doing?"

"I don't know."

"What about Chinnakka?"

"I don't know."

"Your ammamma?"

"That's it. Finally all eyes are on me. Nobody forgets my existence when it comes to doing work. Maybe I've earned some punya! After frying four kunchams of Bengal gram I've collapsed in a corner stiff and exhausted and people imagine that I must cook and serve!"

"How could I know that?"

"Not just that. You're not aware of anything that happens at home. You eat, go around town and come back only at mealtimes. Or you stretch out and fall asleep ... I'm just not in a position to manage ..."

"What's your kooturu doing?"

"Do you think she is idling away her time?"

"..."

"She may not have come and actually done the cooking. But have you ever thought of who is doing all the preliminaries?"

"..."

"Anyway, my energy is waning. My strength is useless. I can't work as much as I used to. You'll have to find some way out for me."

"I'll send for Doctor Brahmanandam tomorrow."

"You're just saying it. What's the point of treating someone who has one foot in the grave?"

"Leave alone being able to work. Don't you need the strength to eat well and rest?"

"It's just that I find it difficult to do any work. Otherwise there's nothing wrong with me. I'm still able to do other things. Only when it comes to cooking, I find it difficult."

"Can't your kooturu do the cooking, and leave the other things to Rukku?"

"Haven't I told you? Is it so easy to solve these problems? In any case, when two widows are around, why should a sumangali wear the madi?"

"..."

"Does such a thing happen anywhere else in the world?"

"..."

"Moreover, for the past fifteen days my kooturu has no appetite."

"Then, make Rukku cook once in a while, but not every day."

"But, what about me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you so dumb? How can you expect me to eat what she has cooked? Oh, what has befallen me!"

"..."

"What's the point of her wearing madi when anyway I have to sit and slog near the stove?"

"..."

"What do I get from all this?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Do you want me to tell you?"

"..."

"You really mean that the thought hasn't struck you?"

"No, it has not."

"Ayyo!"

"..."

"You've studied up to FA?"

"What are you getting at?"

"Listen to me. Her life has already been completely ruined. Whatever else she may have means nothing."

"So?"

"At some point or the other, it's inevitable. Days go by without anything happening."

"So? How will it end?"

"It has to be washed, combed, plaited ... Why does she need her wretched hair now?"

"Why are you spilling sambar?"

"The ladle is hot, my hand is trembling."

"When I asked Rama Deekshitulu a little while ago, he said the day after tomorrow, the dashami, is an auspicious day. If we go to Kotilingalu, it'll take only a minute."

"..."

"You have to be farsighted. These days are not safe for young women who've lost their husbands. It seems that a widow remarriage took place in Veeresalingam's garden only the other day. I believe they're searching for widows to marry those four rascals. They're performing

weddings without even waiting for the auspicious time, as and when they find people. No point in getting upset later on."

"She's not even seventeen …"

"So what? What does it matter how old she is? It's precisely because she's not yet seventeen that her well-wishers should take care that she doesn't go astray."

"…"

"Because she is named after your amma, you seem to want to pamper her. It's nothing but playing with fire."

"What does your kooturu say?"

"Why bring her into it?"

"Still …"

"However much such a thing is necessary, can a mother utter those words herself?"

"What about me?"

"What about you? You are a man, after all. Even otherwise, am I not here to get it done by morning without troubling anyone?"

"Why have you spilt water, tallee?"

"The vessel slipped from my hand, Nanna. It was greasy with ghee."

"Did you see? Did you hear? This is how she is. She can't do a single thing properly. Whatever she does, she doesn't do it neatly, patiently. How can cooking and serving be as easy as lazing and eating?"

"…"

"Why don't you speak?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"What do *I* want you to say? Do you think I'll keep quiet just because you don't respond?"

"…"

"When I go out, the family elders always pester me to do something about her. Did you know that?"

"..."

"You normally don't speak. You can keep quiet for this too. It doesn't mean that if you don't do anything, things will stop happening."

"..."

"If not tomorrow, then day after, the dashami, it's a Wednesday – it'll have to happen. This is the last time I'm telling you. Is that clear?"

"..."

"Did you hear me?"

"How can I not hear you when you're hitting so hard?"

By the time Rukku goes to bed, it's exactly eleven.

By then, the whole household, sleeping in the open, is sound asleep.

The old woman on a stringed cot in the veranda outside the kitchen is fighting with many cats.

Rukku's bed is in the veranda.

She doesn't know how she has come there.

Alone and awake, in this large house with so many people, the extent of her helplessness becomes clear to her.

The lamp beside her shines like a banti flower. But the rest of the house seems like a dungeon.

Nothing seems to strike her at that moment.

Even if it does, she is not able to comprehend it fully.

Even then, it doesn't remain with her.

Even when she is able to retain something, very soon everything becomes complex, like a thorny forest.

In such a state, unable to bear her loneliness, she shuts her eyes tight.

But it only aggravates the situation.

A montage of images flash across – Chinnakka holding the blouse piece and looking at her angrily, Peddakka grinding her teeth and holding the jubba cloth in her hand, Ammamma, with half her teeth

gone and her demon-like mouth, holding a pair of scissors in her hands as the barber walks along sharpening his knife, and her nanna and amma, cheek to cheek, their bodies smeared with the sandalwood paste she had toiled so hard to prepare combined with perfume … Rukku's body suffers hell-like torture.

Unable to lie down any longer, she gets up suddenly and sits on the mat.

Unable to sit either, she stands up.

As soon as she does that, she darts into the front yard.

Once there, she opens the door and runs out to the street.

She feels as if she has been let out of prison.

With this there is a sudden rush … at an almost electric speed.

And a divine spark in her eyes.

Suddenly, in a flash, the streets of Innispeta run through her mind, like a map on a globe.

She is standing behind Nalamvari satram.

Opposite her are a few people standing in front of Varadarao hotel.

"Oh God!" she says, stunned.

A jutka fellow, who lies resting beneath his jutka by the side of the wall, observes all this.

"Do you need the jutka?"

"…"

"Pay me only if I go fast enough to carry you to the clouds."

"…"

"Midnight, scorpions, snakes, rupee, half a rupee or quarter of a rupee, give whatever you please."

Having had no response to any of his questions, the jutka fellow comes up to her, worried whether there's something wrong with her, looks at her and says, quietly, "Where do you want to go, Amma?"

"To which area do you belong?" she asks him softly.

"Danawayigunta," he replies, also in a whisper.

"How much will you take?" her lips merely mouth the words.

"You want to go to Pantulu's garden?" he asks, as though recalling something.

Thrilled at this she nods.

"I will take you there within minutes, get in quick," he walks towards the jutka.

"But I don't have even a copper coin," she says, hastily retracing a few steps.

"You don't have to give me anything if you want to go to Pantulu's garden," he says, bringing the horse to the jutka and getting it ready.

She climbs into the jutka hurriedly, and sits huddled in a corner.

The jutka man flogs the horse.

He runs beside it till the jutka picks up speed and then rides it.

"I too understand the difficulties, Amma. I have only one kooturu. A month after she attained maturity, even before we had performed the ritual, ten days ago her bharta died. When I look at her or remember her I am deeply pained ... When even I'm not able to bear this, can you imagine my bharya's sorrow? She has stopped eating or even drinking gruel, is starving, lying in bed like one constipated. Unable either to console my kooturu or stay at home looking after my bharya, or maintain my family after staying home for a month ... even God can't imagine the torture I am going through.

"Two marriages were held the day before in Pantulu's garden. The third one took place yesterday. The fourth too would have been performed, but for the father and brothers of the girl who stopped the cart – my own jutka – and dragged her back to their house. I felt as if my heart had stopped beating. I thought of the hope with which the girl must have gone there, how long she must have wished to go there, how painful it must be for her now, and what would happen to her as the days went by. My heart aches, Amma ...

"They are looking for another girl …

"The boy is good looking, like a prince …

"It seems he gets a salary of sixty rupees a month …

"It's true it will be his second marriage, but he's not even twenty five. The poor thing …

"The father had performed sacrificial rituals, I believe …

"The moment you reach there, you'll be married to him …

"You must have done punya in your past. Don't worry, Amma. You'll be happy hereafter, with no more difficulties.

"Ten days later, after my kooturu forgets what's happened to her, she too …"

And he flogs the horse harder lest someone tries again to prevent him.

The jutka flies over the clouds.

"Arikallakinda Mantalu" was first published in *Prabuddhandhra* in June1935. This version has been translated from *Sripada Subrahmanyasastry: Chinna Kathalu*, Kalabhivardhanee Parishattu,Rajamahendravaram, 1954 (1940).

Chalam

Argument

Your Honour, before passing judgment on me, consider the things I'm telling you!

Like me, you too have desires. Your body is like mine – made of flesh and blood, not iron. The soul that is in me and in everyone else, shines in you as well. Even though you turn your heart into stone, it still beats within you. You're not a machine that measures crime, decrees a punishment and then flings it at my face! Listen to me, please, to all that I have to say and then, if you consider it just, acquit me. Don't you have the freedom to acquit me? If you don't, then give up this job, if you have the courage. Will you punish an innocent person just because you lack the courage? Then do it.

I'm innocent. Yet you argue with me and prove to me that I'm guilty. Ask that advocate to keep quiet. He's interested not in the truth, but only in his fees. I'm admitting to my crime myself. There's no need for witnesses. You have a brain. So do I. Let us think together.

Yes, I aborted the child. Tell me why is that a crime?

So the books say it's wrong – don't go by them. Books are ancient. Those who wrote them were evil people, without brains. If we follow their words blindly, where is the need to have our own brains? Why

do we need intelligence? Will you succumb to the words in the books? I rebelled. If you succumb to them, you're more of a coward than I, you have no mind of your own and you are a criminal yourself. What right do you then have to punish me?

Now listen to me … Do you say that what I did at the very outset was wrong? But *that* is not punishable even according to your books. You yourself do it. Do you say it's wrong to do it because I don't have a husband? Even if I become pregnant by my husband, isn't it still a crime to get rid of an unborn child? Also, is it not wrong to make sure you don't get pregnant? If you do become pregnant, then are things wrong from the start? Becoming pregnant is not my mistake, is it? When you consider it the wife's fault if she *doesn't* get pregnant, how come you find fault with my *getting* pregnant? And when I am pregnant, you ask me why I killed the foetus.

I have many reasons. Those who look after me will desert me. How will I live? I know no other means of earning my livelihood. Can't you do manual work? Can't you cook? How easily you ask these questions. Will men allow a beautiful woman working as a labourer or a cook to live in peace? The people present here are so great! Is it enough to wear coats and turbans, laugh sarcastically, twirl one's moustache and fix me with a stare? Who doesn't know the truth about all of you?

When men force themselves on me, what happens to your justice? If I don't give in to them, they complain to their wives and have me removed from work. When the men complain about me, the women initially fight with their husbands, but eventually show me the door. With due respect, I too have to live. Everybody blames only me for succumbing! Try throwing your wives out into the streets instead of hiding them inside your rooms, without so much as a paisa to their names, like me. As soon as they are widowed, don't they go to a relative's house where they are made to work endlessly? As a self-respecting

woman, I prefer freedom to such demeaning work. Ask your wives to earn a paisa on their own, then they'll know. They'll know what'll happen to their arrogance and their pativratayam! Ask them to go and live outside their homes for a few days and they'll know what it is to live that way!

Let that be. As soon as I became pregnant, he left me. I needed more food. I was not feeling well. I needed medicines. What could I do? If I had come to your doorstep, you too would have driven me out. Am I not right? Your wives, who are pativratas, would have washed the doorstep clean after I'd left, sprinkling it with water mixed with cow dung to purify the places polluted by my shadow.

If I have a child, will you bring it up? If not, will you at least look after the expense of its upbringing? There are orphanages, you say. But it seems they only take in legitimate children when their parents die. Is there any proof that those who founded these orphanages were born legally? If people taunt my child and call him a prostitute's son, who will console him? Will you allow him to play with your children?

My old man is finding it difficult to take care of me. Thrice every day he asks me to leave the place. I can starve and die. But how will I kill the child? Unable to tolerate its suffering, I will have to drown it in a well. You will read of it in the papers – "Woman Kills Son and Commits Suicide." You will abuse her and wonder what was wrong with her. Then you'll fold the paper, switch off the light and fall asleep.

Will either you or your forefathers, who made the law, save my child from ignominy or me from excommunication? You know nothing of these things. The only thing you know is how to put me behind bars.

Yes, as I had no other recourse, as I couldn't bear to see my child cry, as I was a mother, I committed this act. So why do you object?

First you claim that I have killed another. Is it a part of me or is it a

separate being? If it is a part of me, what is your objection if I remove it? If I have a boil, won't I remove it? If I chop off my arm, what's it to you? Is it a separate being? Isn't it mine? Then who asked it to enter my body? And without my permission? Who asked it to enter and trouble me? If someone enters your house without your permission, what would you do? Just like you, I drove it away. If it died, what can I do? Did I ask it to come? No. I did not want to have a child. Not one bit. Is it right that it came in, threatened my health, ruined my beauty and sullied my reputation? Why should I protect it?

For its sake? No, it appears as if I should do it for yours. So that all of you can abuse it, make fun of it and justify your pativratas and the pure births of your children.

I'll swallow any medicine I like. Who asked it to die? When you have worms in your stomach, won't you take medicines to kill them?

How do you know that it actually has life? Before it touches the earth it doesn't even breathe. How then do you say so? Have you ever been pregnant? Your Honour, what do you know? Are you happy if a child is born and then starved to death? Will it please your eyes? Don't you give a death sentence to those who have committed a murder? Why then don't you give me that punishment? Does one infer then that it's not a complete living being? Would it be half a being, or a quarter of a being? Will it have half a soul or a quarter of a soul? Do you people have complete souls? Indeed, if you do, then why do you torment me so? Then, maybe it's not wrong to kill you even! How much life does a hen's egg have? Do animals like cows have souls?

What do you know that you can sit in judgment over me? Are you saying that my health will be ruined? Why don't you punish those who overeat in hotels and old men who take medicines for the sake of their young wives? Why don't you punish judges who get piles and diabetes in their forties? Could you only catch hold of a helpless

creature like me? If my health is ruined, who cares? If I die, who bothers? Your wives will be very happy to see that a woman who had fallen prey to evil ways is completely ruined.

Do all of you say that by killing it, the population will come down? Virtuous people like you are all around, aren't they? Punish every woman who doesn't give birth, force all the widows to have children!

Who are you to ask me to bear another being so that your tribe increases? Are you saying that the world will not go on? What's it to me? Did I promise you that I would make the world go on?

Actually, hasn't society ordered me not to give birth to the child? Yet the law is asking me to have it. If I have the baby, society will punish me, if I don't the law will. But isn't it society that created the law?

A creative power put another being inside me. It also vested me with the power to kill it. Why do you interfere? What do you say? Will you acquit me? Are you afraid you'll lose your job? For the sake of your job, will you punish me, an innocent person? Is this just? Is this fair?

Answer me.

"Argumentu" was first published in *Chukkamma*, Desee Prachurana, Vijayawada, 1957. This version has been translated from Yavanavvanam, Aruna Publishing House, Vijayawada, 1982.

Kanuparti Varalakshmamma

The Promise

The members of the newly formed Society for the Promotion of Dramatic Arts in Bandar met one day and decided that from that day on, only women should play the role of women in all future productions. Jagannadham was the one to boldly introduce the proposal, to answer all questions pertaining to it, and to get it passed. When Jagannadham's proposal was approved, Sarma proposed yet another controversial resolution. What was it? That, as it was the Society's main objective to see that their resolution about women acting on stage did not remain a mere resolution but become a reality, all the members were to get their wives to learn their roles in the forthcoming productions over the next three months and perform with them in the next three plays to be staged during the summer vacations.

There were a lot of objections before the resolution was passed. Many members opposed it giving all sorts of excuses. My wife is the mother of an infant. My wife has gone to her parents' home for delivery. My wife is not feeling well. It is wrong to take such decisions without taking the opinion of the women at home. Even if I agree, there is my father at home, he wouldn't agree. We observe purdah, our women

are not educated and the like. Finally, when the resolution was put to vote, the ayes and nays were equal. With the President, Ananthacharyulu saying Aye, the resolution was passed. The members reached home debating amongst themselves what to do.

That night the members discussed the matter with their wives. In each house arguments and counter arguments continued till midnight.

The wife of Sarma, who had moved the second resolution, rejected the idea outright saying, "Not only have you given up your job for the sake of promoting art and caused trouble to your wife and children, but now you're asking me to act in plays. Whatever happens, I can't act, can't perform these roles. As it is, I feel shy when men play the roles of both husband and wife. Then how do you expect *me* to play a role? And where would I leave these four children? One girl wakes up in the middle of the night. One girl wants to go out. Before the morning, I have to mix the formula and feed this boy twice."

"Don't worry about the children. I'll employ someone."

"Will a paid servant take proper care if we're not around?"

"I will be there."

"Wonderful! You will stay at home and look after the children and I will act on the stage with some man!"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Resign from the membership of this Society."

"Nothing can be more demeaning than that."

"Likewise, it is demeaning for me to act with men."

"So, you won't listen to me?"

"Forgive me. If you ask me to take poison and give up my life, I will. But, I can't act in those plays. Why are you bent on upsetting me?" Saying this, she fell at her husband's feet and began crying loudly. Sarma was nonplussed.

Nayudu too took up the matter with his wife.

"As it is, the people of our caste criticize us for not observing purdah,

and for going to plays and meetings. If I were to start acting, we wouldn't be able to hold up our heads in public! If people like us, who have daughters, enter such fields thoughtlessly, we won't get grooms for our girls. Anyway, don't you know how haphazard my education has been? I can't even put small words together to read. How can I cope with the verses in the plays?" Nayudu's wife effectively silenced him.

And so it happened that in most houses the men asked their wives the same question and the wives said, "No, we can't." On the whole, no member's wife agreed to the idea. But Jagannadham had a game plan. He didn't tell his wife, Janaki, the truth initially. That night, after she had had dinner, set the kitchen in order, arranged the mattresses, leisurely placed the paan box next to her, given some betel nut to her husband and put some in her own mouth, after she had smeared lime on a betel leaf and was placing it in her mouth, just as she was about to speak happily to him, Jagannadham interrupted her, "Janaki! Will you do me a favour?"

"What is it?"

"Whatever it is, will you do it?"

"All right, I will. Now tell me."

"You're saying all right but will you really do it?"

"I said I will. Why do you doubt me without even telling me what it is?"

"You sounded doubtful, that's why I doubted you."

"No doubt, no nothing. I'll definitely do it. You would never ask me to do anything which shouldn't be done, would you?"

"..."

"Have I ever disobeyed you, that I should do so now?"

"So, you promise?"

"Don't you believe me still? I promise. I promise with all my heart. However difficult it is, I won't go back on my word."

"... ... ..."

"Where are they? Give me your hands," Janaki said. Her husband was sitting on an easy chair, hands folded on his lap. Picking up his hands, she covered them with her own and looking at him added laughingly, "I'll do whatever you want. Have your doubts disappeared? Now tell me what you want me to do."

Jagannadham was speechless. His normally bright face grew extremely pale.

"What is it you want me to promise?"

"It'll be as if you've killed me if you don't honour your promise, right?"

"Oh no! Oh no! Why do you say such things? Couldn't you find anything other than this for me to swear by!" Janaki's eyes were brimming with tears.

"... ... ..."

How much trust and love Janaki's words reveal! And look at the deceit, the betrayal I'm responding with against my pure, loved one! God knows how devastated she'll be with what I'm about to tell her! Haven't I already chained her freedom? I'm a traitor, a traitor to my wife. With these thoughts, Jagannadham, feeling ashamed and unhappy, slumped into his chair without a word.

Janaki was frightened by the paleness of his face. Her eyes filled with tears, she bent down suddenly and putting her face against his, looked at him anxiously and asked, "Is anything wrong? Why are you like this?"

In the meanwhile, there was a change in Jagannadham's chain of thoughts. Am I not a man who ardently believes that women should taste freedom in all spheres – starting from elementary education to love affairs? Why should I show such cowardice in such a trivial family matter? No woman will agree to what I'm suggesting if I tell her beforehand. We have to liberate them even if it means using some guile and force. There's nothing unjust in what I am doing. He convinced

himself thus and gathering courage, cleared his throat and said, "Janaki, we passed a resolution in our Society today."

"What was it?"

"From now on, in the plays put up by the Society, only women must play the roles of women. To start with, members of the Society must make their wives start this tradition and get them to perform in the next three plays to be staged during the coming summer vacation."

"So?"

"Accordingly, you as my wife, must learn a female role and take part in the play. Actually, it was I who proposed this resolution."

"What was your intention?"

"To propagate art."

"But one's performing in a play should be one's own choice, shouldn't it? You shouldn't force one who is not interested, should you?"

"It's not entirely by choice ..."

"Then, why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I knew you wouldn't agree."

"That's true, but not because of any ill feeling. Because of my respect for art. Okay, will you be playing the hero?"

"I don't have the right voice modulation. I won't fit into the hero's role. Your voice is very sweet. Your oratory, your sweet voice, will make you suitable for the female lead. So you must act with a man who fits the hero's role."

"What? With another man?"

"Yes."

"Oh no! How you've deceived me!" Janaki said, beating her chest.

"So, you won't act?"

"How can I not act? It is not just any promise that I have given. Haven't you made me swear by your life? What's more important to me than your life?"

Janaki's eyes filled with tears. She wiped them with the edge of her sari and kept her eyes fixed on the ground. Jagannadham felt miserable at his deceitful act. Four, five minutes passed in silence. "What about the children?" asked Janaki finally, looking unhappily at her husband.

"I'll look after them," said Jagannadham, avoiding her eyes.

Janaki heaved a big sigh and said, "What has happened has happened. I'm bound by my promise. You've to grant me three favours."

"What are they?"

"I won't come to the rehearsals. I won't act in this town. I won't go to neighbouring towns without you or the children."

"All right."

At the meeting the next day all the members reported that their wives had refused to come, and pleading their helplessness said that if the wives were forced to come, they would resign from the Society. Only Jagannadham, without revealing his deceitful act, said that his wife had agreed to act and received the approbation of his friends. There was renewed enthusiasm among the members when they came to know that a woman was to portray the heroine's role. As already decided, they had resolved to stage *Savitri, Paduka Pattabhishekam* and *Sarangadhara*. The plays were to be rehearsed the following day. Janaki's lines were sent to her the very next day.

"My husband's command is sacred to me. Sumati, the epitome of pativratayam, carried her leper husband on her head to the house of a prostitute. Similarly, I too will obey my husband's orders," Janaki resolved as she received the script.

Professor Jagannadham, MA, LT, was very pleased that his wife had agreed to fulfil his desire.

As soon as the summer vacation began, the members of the Society set out, bag and baggage, to stage the plays. Jagannadham went too, along with his family. All arrangements had been made for the performance in Bezawada. There were posters on every wall.

Pamphlets were distributed with fanfare. One couldn't tell what Jagannadham thought seeing the large notices with his wife's name next to his, in big bold print, but Janaki felt very uneasy. She didn't know why her husband had displayed her name like that. The name of one who had been living a quiet life was suddenly everywhere, on walls, on gobbe trees, on horse-drawn vehicles and on trees along the road. Her husband did not notice her apprehensions.

By eight o'clock that evening they were sent packed food in a tiffin carrier. She served her husband, daughter, herself and Acchi, who had been employed to look after her son. Her son was already asleep. Her daughter, Leela, also fell asleep as soon as she finished eating.

After Janaki finished all her work, she woke her son up and fed him. She told Acchi, "If the boy gets up, put him in the cloth cradle and rock him." She told her husband, "If the girl gets up and cries, give her the biscuits in the bag. I have kept hot water in the flask. If the boy gets up and cries, mix the milk powder with the hot water and feed him. Don't forget to use hot water, for cold water will make him sick. Actually, he's not used to bottle milk. I don't know whether he'll drink it or not."

Jagannadham was making a note of where the milk powder tin and biscuits were when they heard a car approach and honk. Realizing that it had come to take Janaki, Jagannadham stood up, excited. A man got off the car and told Jagannadham, "The play is about to begin. They have asked me to bring Ammagaru."

In the other room, Janaki was looking at her son. Jagannadham said, "Janaki! The car has come. Are you ready?"

Janaki replied, "Just as a magician binds and holds a snake, you've bound me by my promise. If we had the good fortune of acting together as husband and wife, I would have even been content to lead the rest of my life as an actress. But God hasn't granted me that good fortune either. It's not easy for a woman to imagine a strange man as her

husband and act. That is what is troubling me. But it's my duty to follow your command. Namaskaram. I'll see you later. Look after the children well."

Saying this, she left. Jagannadham bade goodbye to his wife, standing on the veranda with a forced smile that distorted his face. Janaki crossed the gate, went onto the road and got into the car.

Should I wear a wig? Should I use makeup? Should I put flowers on my hair? Should I wear jewellery? Should I drape myself in a sari? Earlier, it was the male actors who had to struggle with these questions.

The moment she arrived, Janaki burst upon the stage like a bolt of lightning. She began to act, doing complete justice to the role she was playing and to the conduct of a wife. The male actor, knowing her temperament, did not perform with the brazen indiscrimination he used when men played the roles of women, and acted with restraint. Their behaviour pleased the entire audience. But was it possible to practise physical restraint all through a play? Satyavanta had cut the tree in the forest and was about to collapse. She had to hold him with her delicate hands and lay his head on her lap. Janaki's body trembled. She was torn apart, as if she was about to commit a big crime. She perspired profusely.

Even when my husband is alive and well, I have to lay him on my lap and cry like a woman who has lost her husband, thought Janaki, shedding tears. A husband's command is harsher than a king's. Otherwise, how could my husband have ordered me to act on stage? Why have I accepted his command? What is right? Are improper orders to be obeyed too? Is it against a wife's duty to disobey even such orders? Yet, the promise has bound me. It's not just any promise. He made me swear by his life. What's more important to me than his life? That's why I have agreed to this demeaning thing. May God grant my husband a long life! Let this wrong act not affect my life! Even as

Janaki shed tears with these thoughts, Savitri laid Satyavanta on her lap. What more would the audience want at that moment? Only tears. No matter the reason, Janaki was able to portray sorrow very well and earn the appreciation of the audience. Meanwhile, Yama arrived. Savitri slowly removed Satyavanta from her lap and paid obeisance to Yama. The exchange between Savitri and Yama deeply impressed the audience. Janaki displayed the full range of her talent in this scene.

A little after Janaki left for the theatre, the boy woke up. He looked all around for his mother. Not being able to find her, he started crying. His wailing did not wake Acchi, who lay next to the cradle but it woke an agitated Jagannadham. He got up with a start and picked up the baby. "Babu, don't cry," he said trying to comfort the child, resting his head on his shoulder. But the boy was not to be pacified and wouldn't rest his head on his father's shoulder. He raised his head, like a snake raising its hood, and looked all around. He looked at his nanna. He cried. However much his nanna cajoled him, he wouldn't stop crying. Unable to comfort him, Jagannadham woke up Acchi. She was herself a young girl. After an hour of trying to wake her up, she finally got up rubbing her eyes and picked up the boy. She walked him up and down in the cool breeze. She showed him some toys. She placed him in the cradle and rocked him. But no matter what she did the boy wouldn't stop crying.

"Wait, let me give him some milk. Maybe he is hungry." Jagannadham brought out the Glaxo tin, the hot water flask, the silver vessel, the spoon and the jug and sat down. He didn't have a clue about how much milk powder and water to add and how to mix them. He tried once. The milk looked watery. He added some more powder. Now, the milk became too thick. He added some more water. Then some more milk powder. Soon the big vessel was filled with milk. But he was not happy. Something was still nagging him.

The child kept crying. Now how was he to feed the child? Will children used to mother's milk let a bottle come near their mouths? He propped up the child on his lap, put the milk in the bottle, placed the nipple on the spout and tried to feed the child by pushing the nipple into his mouth. Never fed this way before, the child pursed his lips refusing to open them and pushed the bottle away with his hand, crying loudly. Jagannadham thought perhaps he didn't want the nipple, and poured the milk back into the big vessel. This is not the way. I'll make him lie down on my legs and feed him. Thinking thus, he laid the child on his legs and tried to feed him with a spoon. The child pushed that away too. The child began to thrash his hands and feet and promptly brought up the little milk that had been forced into his mouth. One kick and the vessel and spoon went flying. Another, and the thermos flask was reduced to pieces.

Jagannadham's anger couldn't be described. He lost patience. Forgetting that it was only an infant, he hit the child hard on his back. With a shriek, the child contorted his body, looked around for his mother and not finding her anywhere, entwined himself around his father's feet. When he looked at the child, Jagannadham's heart sank. Tears streamed down his eyes. He grasped the child in his arms, held him to his chest and said, "Nayana, what a criminal I am! I hit you so hard with these evil hands. Your amma is your property. It's your birthright to drink your amma's milk. I denied you your right. Is it wrong of you to rebel like this? Babu, I've made a mistake. Don't cry. Nayana, don't cry. See, it's two o'clock now. Your amma will be here soon. She'll feed you to the full." Trying to pacify him, he put the child on his shoulder and started walking up and down the veranda. A scared and bewildered Acchi huddled close to the wall, for she had never seen her master so angry, irritated and confused before.

Even when immersed in work, a mother's thoughts are always with her child. She doesn't relax for a minute whether she goes to a festival, a procession, a gossip session or a family function, or even to work as a labourer, or to eat. I've left an infant at home who still drinks my milk. I can't stay even for a moment. I'll have to go. Have to go. The child must be agitated, its throat must be parched. This is her anxiety. Janaki's heart too was beating with this anxiety. Her heart was with her son. Only her body was on the stage. She completed the play somehow, and without singing the farewell song, got into the car and hurried home.

Jagannadham was still carrying the boy on his shoulder, patting him and walking up and down. As soon as she saw her husband, she said, "Why are you walking him? Is he crying?" She immediately took the baby in her arms. "I was just thinking that the child would have woken up and begun to cry. It's summer, his throat must be parched. I wanted to come early but it was not possible. Babu, are you troubling your nanna?" Crooning to her baby, speaking soothingly to him, Janaki began to feed the child. One didn't know where those sobs, those hiccups, that stubbornness disappeared. The child, laughing now and kicking his arms and legs, happily drank his milk. A number of things can be learnt from this inseparable bond between a mother and her child – things like a mother's anxiety, a child's happiness, et cetera.

Jagannadham began to think that it was not possible to transfer things which seem easily achievable in the imaginary world to the real one. Feeding her baby, the untainted Janaki asked her husband many questions, "Did the child get up as soon as I left? Did you give him milk? Did he drink it? Why didn't he sleep?" Perhaps out of impatience or out of shame, Jagannadham didn't respond properly. But as soon as Janaki went in, she saw the vessels in which he had mixed the milk, the spilt milk, the broken hot water flask. She immediately knew all that had transpired in her absence.

Janaki felt bad, thinking her husband must have been put to a lot of trouble by her child.

The next day the theatre group went to Eluru as planned. All the preparations to stage *Paduka Pattabhishekam* were complete. Janaki was to play Kaika's role. Kaika ranks first among the women who have been blamed by society since the beginning of time. The soft-hearted Janaki seemed a misfit in the role. But what could she do? She had to keep the promise made to her husband, hadn't she? Recollecting the problems he had had with his son the previous night, Jagannadham was reluctant to send his wife to the play. But knowing that if he refused to send her, he would infuriate the other members of the cast and become the butt of ridicule among his friends, he said nothing. Janaki left for the theatre at nine o'clock. The food from the hotel arrived late. Leela who had gone to bed without eating, got up as soon as her mother had left and asked, "Nanna! Where's Amma?"

"She's just stepped out. She'll be back. Are you hungry? Shall I give you food?" asked the father.

"I want Amma to serve me."

"Amma won't be back now."

"I want to go to Amma."

"Amma has gone to the toilet."

"I want to go to the toilet too."

"Acchi will take you."

"Then I don't want to go. Where's Amma?"

"Amma has gone out somewhere."

"Then who'll feed me?"

"I will."

"No! Do nannas feed children anywhere?"

"They do, come."

"No, I only want Amma."

Leela started weeping softly. Frightened that the boy too would get

up and start wailing, Jagannadham gave Leela a few biscuits and a glass of warm milk with sugar candy. Then he picked her up and walked her up and down. Though she didn't make the kind of fuss the boy had, she kept asking "Where's Amma? Where's Amma?" and irritated her father thoroughly. To top it all, the boy woke up at one o'clock. Having woken up in the middle of the night, he was agitated. He wouldn't allow himself to be carried, wouldn't remain in anyone's arms, wouldn't lie in the cradle, wouldn't drink milk. Jagannadham put Leela down and picked him up. Leela, who had wanted to cry all along, took advantage of her father putting her down and began to wail loudly. The boy, who seemed to think every bout of his akka's wailing had to be competed with, kept her company. If two people in authority want to punish the guilty one at the same time, what can even the most patient of criminals do? Poor Jagannadham stood bewildered between the two wailing children. He didn't know how to console them. A mother is able to take care of five or six children at the same time. Oh! How much patience there is in women! Men haven't even got past Lesson One. Thoughts such as these darted like streaks of lightning in his mind. But was it the time to discuss and resolve the successes and failures of mothers and fathers? When the boy was crying continuously even though the father was carrying him, the girl twined herself around his leg and insisted "Carry me too." Jagannadham wanted to hit her for her obstinacy. But because he was smitten with remorse for having beaten the boy the previous day, he couldn't bring himself to hit Leela. When the sin of taking away their mother from them was his, how could he hit them?

"Naanee, Acchi will carry you. Don't cry. Won't you listen to me? Don't you want me to buy toys and sweets for you?"

"What about new clothes?"

"Yes, new clothes too."

"Picture books?"

"Those too. I'll buy you everything if you don't cry."

"I won't cry, just show me Amma."

"There, it's two o'clock now. Amma will soon get into a car and come."

"Where did she go?"

"To the market."

"Why didn't she take me?"

"Why don't you and your tammudu play hide and seek?"

A horn sounded at the gate. "Nanna! The car has come. Why hasn't Amma come?"

"There, she's coming."

"Amma's coming! Amma's coming!" Leela clapped her hands. The boy stopped crying, and laughing happily, clapped his hands along with his akka and the two children welcomed their mother enthusiastically.

Janaki climbed up the veranda steps. The boy jumped into her arms. Janaki sat down where she was and leaned against the wall to feed her child. As the child drank milk, pulling at the gold chains around his mother's neck and swinging his legs, Leela complained, "Tell me why did you go to the market without me," and nuzzled her head into her mother's shoulder.

Jagannadham watched them together, aghast at what he had done.

The troupe went to Rajahmundry for the third play. They were put up at the zamindar's house. That day they were to perform *Sarangadhara*. Janaki was to enact the role of Chitrangi. Anyone who has seen *Sarangadhara* will always be unsure of whom to blame.

The law affirms that the fault lies only with Rajarajanarendra. But morality says Chitrangi is wrong. Nobody questions the wrong act of Rajarajanarendra for deceiving Chitrangi by showing her his son's portrait and then marrying her himself. The world condemns Chitrangi, who loves the youth she had seen in the portrait. In society,

morality is a very important issue. No one, not even those in high positions, can be called good if they shun morality. Coming up in life is linked only with the principles of morality. Though, at times, these may be difficult to follow, people cannot give them up. Therefore, Chitrangi has become the target of society's condemnation.

Let's assume that what Rajarajanarendra did was wrong. What has happened has happened. Why can't she remain moral? say the people finding fault with Chitrangi. As long as this world is given to moralizing of virtues, Chitrangi's character will always be condemned. Moreover, our poets, used to making a mountain out of a molehill, have maligned her even more with their ridiculous descriptions. So much so that it has become natural to call a pleasure loving woman of a disreputable community, a Chitrangi. Of course, it makes no difference when Chitrangi's disreputable behaviour is overdone in written literature. But when this happens in a play, it is the bane of the actor's existence.

And even more so when the woman playing the role is from a respectable family. Though she had learnt Chitrangi's part, Janaki was agonizing within herself how to emote it. To lure a very good man into a love affair, she had to act wanton and disreputable. How could a morally upright woman enact this role? Every word in *Sarangadhara,* especially in the bedroom scene, haunted and tormented Janaki. Till he says No, I have to continue with this demeaning act. What can I do? That promise has restricted me. This is one of the duties of a pativrata. I hope this doesn't bring me infamy. I have given away everything to my husband. This body is his, not mine. It is my duty to let him enjoy this body any way he wants and make him happy, she thought unhappily, sitting on the steps of the house.

Jagannadham too was pacing the veranda nearby. He was looking at his wife and was lost in thought. He knew that Janaki was not her usual self. He rightly guessed that, perhaps, having to act the part of Chitrangi

that night was bothering her. He knew that what he was subjecting his wife to amounted to mental torture. Didn't a woman give herself to a man on the understanding that he would take care of her in every manner? Could a man use his wife, who had trusted him, for these demeaning acts? Wasn't he abusing the rights of a husband?

What had happened had happened. What if he asked her to stop this now? He was the one who had moved the resolution, he was the one who had it passed, he was the one who made it work. If he were the one to withdraw it now, wouldn't everyone laugh at him? But how long can I torture my wife for fear of the others laughing at me? How long can I trouble my children? How long can I put up with this problem? Oh, no! To get through each night is unbearable! The children may soon get spoilt. Janaki is suffering from headaches, undoubtedly because she can't sleep at night. Why am I going through all this? Should I sacrifice my wife and children to propagate art?

Acchi came carrying the child to Janaki. "The boy is crying. However much I try, he doesn't keep quiet. His body too is warm," she said. Janaki and Jagannadham were shocked out of their silence. Janaki took the baby anxiously. "Does he feel warm?" she asked. Jagannadham placed his hand on the child's body and said in a soft, worried tone, "Yes. He has fever! His body is very warm."

"The heat, the journey, different water in different places ... I knew these would give the boy a fever. That's what has happened. There's no sleep at nights."

"True."

After a while Jagannadham asked, "You've got to go to act tonight, don't you?"

"Don't I?"

"It may be difficult to take care of the baby!"

"Yes, it will be."

"Then, it's perhaps better not to go to the play this time."

"After all the preparation, after distributing the pamphlets, after selling the tickets for the past three days, won't there be a lot of trouble? Will it look good if I don't go?"

Looking up at the sky with a pale face and a heavy heart Jagannadham sighed, "This is the last show."

"Yes. If only we could get through this night somehow," said Janaki.

The car arrived at nine thirty to take Janaki to the theatre. However hard she tried, she couldn't bring herself to leave. Three times she climbed in and thrice she returned. She held the boy to feel his fever. The child woke with a start. He was muttering something in his sleep. The fever is very high. How can I leave him and go? she thought. She looked pleadingly at her husband. "Why are you delaying?" Jagannadham asked.

"Nothing. When children have fever, they don't sleep soundly, they cry on and on. I'm wondering how you will quieten him."

"Don't worry. I'll manage somehow. Go."

"Today the car will be here. If the boy cries, send it. I'll come immediately."

"You might be in Rajarajanarendra's palace!"

"Aren't you the one who sent me there? If my promise hadn't shackled my feet, would I have stayed away from my child, even if I'd been asked to? Acting in a play is not more important to me than looking after my child. Wherever my body may be, my heart remains yours alone," said Janaki.

Jagannadham hung his head.

Though Janaki was on stage, her heart wasn't there. The fever of her little son, and her having to play the role of Chitrangi, were both tormenting her. She found the love songs and words of separation in *Sarangadhara* disgusting. She was losing control over herself. Despite all this, duty egged her on and she somehow mustered the strength to stand on the stage. It was time for a song now. She started,

It happened that I was away from my man.
I cannot bear being … from the loved one
Haven't I spent these eight days crying all through …
My man who has the rich beauty of Manmatha, who has body parts which attract women
The man who has the brightness of the Sun, who has the splendour of Devendra, with such …

Somehow, Janaki finished singing. She faltered at every word that was a blot on the fidelity of married women, and her voice gave way in spite of herself. The audience was upset with her performance. "If you were going to stammer like this, why did you bother climbing up on the stage? Tell us!" the audience began to jeer. Janaki felt as if she had been struck by lightning. She was so stunned that she froze lifeless, like a statue. It was only after a while that she could even begin to cry. She lowered her head. Tears streamed down her cheeks and fell on the floor. She went backstage.

"We came for the play only because the papers have been splashed with the news that a woman will be performing. Obviously they haven't seen her act. Oh, what a waste of half a rupee, one rupee, three rupees. Bad. Twenty rupees wasted for tickets for the whole family," ranted the irate audience. "Have you abandoned the play? Why don't you return our money then?" some of the people said. Those who had bought the low priced tickets were creating the maximum fuss.

What's the point of complaining there is hair in the food and getting disgusted with it, after rolling it on a woollen blanket, thought Janaki. Though very upset with the audience's behaviour, she somehow picked up courage and came onto the stage again. But unable to utter such unbecoming words her tongue rebelled. The audience continued to be noisy.

The boy could not sleep. His fever was rising every moment. The breath from his nostrils felt like the heat from a furnace. He was moaning like an old man. He woke up every now and then and cried. Jagannadham's heart sank. He could not see the child suffer. He was too afraid even to draw a chair and sit down. What would the mother do if the boy were with her? Even if I went to get the doctor, there's no one to stay here with the boy. What should I do? Jagannadham thought and then remembered that Janaki had asked him to bring the child to her if he cried. Whatever was to happen would happen. He decided he would take the child and go over. Acchi and Leela were sleeping inside. He was afraid that if he woke Acchi, Leela might wake up too. Without rousing Acchi, he picked up the boy and walked out stealthily. Then he woke up the driver sleeping in the car and told him to get the vehicle ready. Rubbing his eyes, the driver, Kasim, said, "It's ready, Maharaj, please get in."

The car reached the hall in ten minutes. In the meanwhile, because the child had fallen asleep again, Jagannadham laid him on a cushion and told Kasim, "Look after the boy. I'll go inside and see how things are." Thinking that the Professor had come to watch the play, the members of the Society welcomed him. Without acknowledging them, Jagannadham strode straight to the chairs near the stage and stood beside them. Chitrangi and Sarangadhara were exchanging arguments and counter arguments in the bedroom. Sarangadhara was saying, "Siva Siva! No," as Chitrangi pursued him saying, "My heart's beloved! The beloved of women! Heart-throb!"

Watching them, Jagannadham felt as if scorpions and centipedes were crawling all over his body. His mind seemed to have been taken over, his face lost colour, his eyes their brightness. With a mad look in his eyes, his face distorted with anger, he stood there.

"Saranga, how can you with your tender body and extremely soft words, be so hard-hearted? Though your sharp-edged words have

pierced my heart, I don't know by what grace of God they only bounce off. Your order … my ruling … order … prevent you …'"

And so she spoke. Jagannadham couldn't stand it any longer. He lost control. "Ah, ah, Janaki, to what extent have you gone?" he shouted and jumped onto the stage.

Hearing his words of anguish, Janaki crumbled. With tears rolling down her eyes, putting her hand on her heart she said meekly, "Did I dare do such a thing? Tell the truth. Wasn't it you who deliberately deceived me by making me take an oath and then threw me into this fire pit?"

What could Jagannadham say? He stood like a criminal whose crime had been found out.

How could the audience remain seated passively, like stones, when the husband and wife stopped the play midway to talk about their own life? The theatre, built with tin sheets, resounded with a shower of stones. Slippers and walking sticks flew past as if they had suddenly grown wings. Whistles, claps, shouts and hoots! Unable to withstand the attack, the members of the Society refunded the audience's money and ran for their lives. No one knew how Jagannadham escaped the pandemonium.

But by the morning, the town was agog with rumours. "It seems the Professor who had come to make his wife act in the plays, divorced himself from the Society and vanished with his family last night."

"Ottu" was first published in *Bharati: Masapatrika*, December 1933. This version has been translated from *Kanyashramamu (Katha Samputi)*, Sri Goda Grandhamala, Bapatla, 1965.

Kodavatiganti Kutumbarao

Immoral Person

Firmness was born first, then Parvatheesam followed, his mother used to say. She said this not just once and not only to one person, but to a lakh of people and a lakh and a half times.

That he wore his firmness like a title since childhood was well-known. The world casts one in a certain mould and one expends one's life energy trying to live up to the image. Perhaps most of the great benefactors and warriors were made this way. But great poets, intellectuals and others like them were not. For true greatness, conditioning alone is not enough. The truly brilliant need to have some original spark in them. Then again, some believe, a little conditioning might be required to make someone *seem* a great poet or a great intellectual or a great man. It has, in fact, been known to help.

What we are concerned with now is Parvatheesam's firmness. Yes. For decades, Parvatheesam's firmness was world-famous, or at least it was in the small world in which Parvatheesam lived. Not that he had become such only because of his mother's approbation. Both his uncles were famous "obstinate" people. But they did not have anybody who fondly referred to their obstinacy as firmness.

In all the fifty five years of his life, Parvatheesam had worn his obstinacy like a medal, for everybody to see. Wherever possible, he got everyone to bow to his way and accept him as a hero. Where he could not, he sustained a loss but retained his stubbornness and still remained a hero. Or at least he thought so.

How did it matter what other people said? People had different views. Some called him a fool, others called him wicked, some others variously termed him a demon, a rock, a hard-hearted person. Not just outsiders – even people who were close to him said such things about him.

When Parvatheesam had a fight with his in-laws and prevented his wife from stepping into their home for twenty five years, his wife cursed him, deeming him a cruel person, but never aloud.

For Parvatheesam's two sons, life was a tightrope walk because of him. They cursed him in every possible way for this and deserted him as soon as they grew wings.

Had Parvatheesam been rich, his firmness would have been acceptable. Would perhaps even have blossomed. But even in the days when tamarind was sold at its lowest price, Parvatheesam was just a stone's throw away from poverty.

He studied up to the final year of school and was awarded first rank in the whole district in typing and shorthand. The same year he married a ten year old girl, and with the dowry given by his parents-in-law, started a typewriting institute. While running the institute he passed other higher exams in typing and gained renown as an extraordinary typing talent. "Perseverance is none other than Parvatheesam," many people said, expressing admiration.

A big company in the city advertised for a stenographer. "You will easily get the job," his ego was sufficiently boosted by others. He sent in an application, attended the interview, took the white man's dictation, typed it flawlessly and instantly got the job. Within a month,

he was back home, resigning from his position after having quarrelled with his boss.

The same people who had urged him to apply for the job now called him a fool.

A person who doggedly stands for a principle, a person who does no good to anyone by adhering to that principle, ends up harming those around him. But Parvatheesam didn't care. When firmness is confined to an individual, in no way does it improve the world.

Parvatheesam's convictions had never given even an iota of happiness to anyone close to him. But, he had created difficulties and mental torture in great measure.

In fact, it was inevitable that people around Parvatheesam had problems with his idea of "self-fulfilment." His rock-like firmness could only be tested against the sea of disturbance surrounding him.

Parvatheesam's wife had deserted him and had gone away to another world. His sons had gone much earlier to other places, within Andhra Pradesh. Parvatheesam had no idea how they lived and what their wives and children were like. He had only heard that they were earning a lot and doing well. They had never sent him a single paisa. Nor had Parvatheesam, whose only ornament was his determination, ever asked them for any.

Even in such a person, there is scope for human weakness. Parvatheesam's weakness revolved around his daughter. He had transferred to his daughter all his childhood affection for his mother. He had even named her Vardhani after his mother.

It would be an exaggeration to say that Parvatheesam spoilt his daughter with too much affection. Parvatheesam could never have it in him to be so indulgent. But he believed that his daughter did not hate him like his sons, and that she respected his determination. On

her part, Vardhani had never spoken or done anything to destroy this belief.

Vardhani had studied up to the final year in school, when Parvatheesam began to think of getting her married. He broached the subject to all those he knew. When they said a girl's marriage required a dowry, he was outraged. It was not as if he was unaware of the dowry system. It was just that he felt disgraced that people had the temerity to suggest that he, Parvatheesam, should give a dowry.

"There are so many people who marry girls without taking any dowry," stormed Parvatheesam.

"Where are they? Why don't you help us find them?" said his well-wishers.

Actually, Parvatheesam didn't have the resources to give a dowry. He could manage the marriage expenses only if they were kept to a minimum. He couldn't afford anything beyond that. But he first convinced himself that he would never get a husband for his daughter by paying a dowry, even if he had a lakh of rupees, and then behaved as if he was doing it on principle.

Interestingly, Vardhani did get some proposals from boys who did not ask for a dowry. But the proposals – an old widower who was married only once before, a not-so-old widower who was married twice before, another who wanted to stay with his wife in his father-in-law's house and who would be content with two meals a day – seemed to mock Parvatheesam's principle of not giving a dowry.

"Chee, chee! Very bad. Far better for my daughter to stay unmarried than accept any of these," Parvatheesam said.

Vardhani too said the same thing. Parvatheesam was not surprised. He would have been shocked had she said, "Get me married to anyone."

Instead, Vardhani said, "Nanna, why are you so worried about my marriage? If you can, help me continue my studies."

"Well said, my dear. Otherwise, what's all this for?" And so saying, Parvatheesam got her admitted to college.

Vardhani passed her BA. Then she trained as a teacher, got a government job and started looking after her father.

Parvatheesam spent a year peacefully in this manner. Then an enemy in a friend's guise planted a poisonous seed in his mind. Not that Parvatheesam had no enemies. Every principled person acquires enemies without his knowledge. Other people might not have experienced the same degree of torture his wife and children had had to undergo because of his firmness, but there were certainly many who had been humiliated by it. After all, what did you require to humiliate another person? You would feel very belittled if another person said that the film or book you considered good was rubbish. If a piece of advice given by one – with a lot of affection – was ignored, one would feel very hurt. Parvatheesam had upset a lot of people in this manner. But they did not express their anger openly. They hid their resentment in a corner of their minds and continued with their outward display of friendship.

One such friend came specifically to see Parvatheesam and said, "It's nothing much really, but all your self-respect has come to nothing. It's like a man living a full life, but dying in the backyard. I'm extremely sorry that God has bestowed this sorrow on you in your old age, among other worries …" And so saying he got up to leave.

Parvatheesam felt as if he had suffered a stroke. "Wait … Stop! What did you say?" he asked.

"Why do you make me say it?" said the gentleman, vanishing like the fellow who, having lit a match and setting the house afire, vanishes from the scene of the crime.

Parvatheesam grew as angry as Siva himself but kept the poison in his throat and started observing the movements of his daughter

closely. He was not able to find any proof immediately.

Why do I need any proof? Madhavayya must have told the truth. How could he have the guts to invent something like that and tell me a lie? reflected the arrogant Parvatheesam.

Vardhani's salary was two hundred rupees. She didn't seem to be spending more than that. People were so nasty that even when a woman earned a few rupees by working hard they treated her like a woman selling her body. But the very day he comforted himself thus, Vardhani came home late. Parvatheesam heard a car stop in front of the house and then drive away.

"It's very late. Someone seems to have dropped you here in a car," Parvatheesam said to his daughter. He had never concealed his feelings. That was something a person with no self-confidence would do. His voice boomed like a prosecutor questioning the accused in the box.

"I went to a party straight from school. I was delayed there. The person who dropped me is Mr Ramam, the overseer," replied Vardhani, ready to go about her business.

"Wait! How do you know this overseer? What's the connection between him and the party you attended?"

"Why do you bother about all those details?" said Vardhani, irritably.

And Parvatheesam lost control.

"Why shouldn't I worry? As it is, it's rumoured that I've no choice but to depend on you even for food and that I'm eating food provided by a prostitute. Not just a rumour – they're saying it to my face! I never questioned you because I trusted you!"

"I'm not living by selling my body. You can rest assured," said Vardhani. But her tone was not soft.

"Anyway, I think you must get married. Otherwise, people will say whatever they feel like."

"My marriage is not your problem now, as it was before. It's mine."

"How will the problem be solved if you go around in some wretched overseer's car?"

"Why are you worried about that? This overseer is my well-wisher. If he hadn't intervened, I would've lost my job."

"Why do you have to work for a job as precarious as a nose which will fall off at a sneeze? I resigned and came back when I wasn't given proper respect in a white man's company. What's the point of living a life with no self-respect?"

"The question of self-respect doesn't arise here. Mr Ramam is a good friend of mine."

"Is that so! How far has your friendship gone?"

Vardhani, a true daughter of her father, said furiously, "Why do you need all these details? Are you my mamagaru or my attagaru?"

"So you don't even know who I am after all these years? If you knew, you wouldn't have talked in such a nasty manner."

To make his daughter realize how genuine his anger was, Parvatheesam didn't eat at home that day.

Vardhani tried to ask him to come and eat but was told, "I don't want a prostitute's food."

"Maybe, hotel food is all right? You have the money!" the daughter snapped. She who had tolerated her father for so long, now lost patience completely .

The father stared at his daughter like Siva opening his third eye.

Vardhani was not consumed in those flames.

The next day, Parvatheesam felt weak, not having eaten anything that day either. For some reason, he was reminded of his journey to Madras some forty years ago. That was a good job. They had given him eighty rupees even in those days. He would have still had the job. How many increments would he have got! He wouldn't have been in a situation where he had to depend on his daughter's generosity. A

white man's company. He would have looked right in the white man's eyes. These days, it seemed, the bosses treated their subordinates like dogs. They said that the stenographer appointed after him had even gone abroad with the white boss. Maybe he had!

There must have been some connection between this train of thought all day long and his boarding the Madras Mail. He didn't even buy a ticket. He didn't have a paisa in his pocket to do so. He emptied whatever change he had on the table and set off.

Nobody asked him for a ticket on the train which looked like a battlefield strewn with corpses. People slept in all sorts of positions. Parvatheesam found no room to sit. He sat in a damp place leaning against a pile of trunks. He too wanted to sleep endlessly, never to get up. His life had completely changed. Vardhani and her house seemed to belong to another life. Parvatheesam's mind was unwilling to dwell upon them. He had to sleep first. He felt overpowered by something like drowsiness.

Dr (Miss) Snehalatharao looked out of the train coming to a stop, and as soon as she saw Prabhakar, who had come to the station to meet her, waved to him with a smile.

Prabhakar elbowed his way through the crowd, got into the compartment, held both her hands in his and said, "You look like a fresh flower. Good morning. No, *beautiful* morning."

"Have you brought the car?"

"Did you think I walked down?"

"Call the porter. I've only these two pieces of luggage."

Lifting the suitcase and bedding onto the porter's head, the two of them walked along. A crowd had gathered by the bogey next to the engine.

"Poor fellow! … Is he alive? … None of his people are with him … He's alone …" words such as these were heard in English, Tamil and Telugu.

If the doctor had not seen Parvatheesam being taken out of the train like a corpse, she wouldn't have stopped. But having seen him, the doctor in her sprung to the surface. "I'm a doctor, let me see him," she said, pushing her way through the crowd. When she reached Parvatheesam, she felt his pulse, examined his breathing and opened his eyelids.

Prabhakar asked, "Is he drugged?"

"No. He's weak from not having eaten anything. We'll take him to the clinic if you don't mind," she said.

"Oh, no. Not at all," said Prabhakar.

That's how Parvatheesam became Dr (Miss) Snehalatharao's patient. It didn't take more than an hour for him to recover.

Seeing the doctor's face as soon as he opened his eyes, he thought she was a goddess and, for a moment, was under the illusion that he had reached heaven.

"How are you now?" she asked in English.

"I'm all right … Who are you?"

"I'm a doctor. How many days is it since you ate?"

"How many days … what … what day is it today … by the way … I got into a train … what place is this …" Parvatheesam was confused.

"You collapsed in the train from exhaustion. You reached Madras in the same condition. You are in my clinic now. You don't seem to be a poor man. Why did you have to go without food?"

Parvatheesam made a face and said, "It's a long story, Amma. Don't remind me of it now."

"You're not sick. You can have a full meal this afternoon if you want. Don't worry. But where were you going? You didn't have any money or a ticket. Someone must have picked your pocket. You were not in a position to understand what was happening," said the doctor.

"It must have happened like that. I was coming to this city.

Circumstances have forced me to look for a job at a time when I should be retiring."

"If you have anybody in Madras, tell me. I'll send you there," said the doctor after thinking for a long time.

"I don't have anyone in Madras. Can you get me a small job? Don't think I'm placing my burden on you. One feels like asking a second favour from one who has already helped once," said Parvatheesam.

"Rest for a while. I'll come back and speak to you at leisure," said the doctor before leaving to attend to other patients.

She came back after quite a while and said, "I've spoken to someone. You'll hear from them by evening. For the present, you can come home with me. Let's go."

Parvatheesam stood up and walking normally, came out to the street and got into a taxi with her. After going for about a mile and a half, the taxi stopped in front of a house.

So this was where the doctor lived. A very ordinary place. The small signboard on the gate read, "Doctor (Miss) Snehalatharao, MBBS." Parvatheesam gathered that her mother and brother lived with her. They were Telugus.

There were five or six chairs on the veranda. The doctor pointed to an easy chair and asked Parvatheesam to relax in it.

For a long time no one spoke to him. But he could hear all the conversation. He realized it was a warm and affectionate household.

It must have been the doctor's brother who came out after some time to ask, as though he had known him for a long time, "Would you like a bath, Saar? I'll show you the bathroom … There's the towel … the soap. Take off these clothes, I'll give you a fresh shirt and a dhoti."

Parvatheesam had a bath but put on his own clothes. With the bath, he got back three fourths of his energy. Then he sat at the table, and ate with the doctor and her brother. Her mother served. The food was low on salt and chillies but tasted like nectar to Parvatheesam.

After the meal, the doctor had a cot put out on the veranda and asked him to rest. But Parvatheesam's mind didn't relax. Even as it remained restless, his body took a nap.

At four in the evening Prabhakar came to the doctor's house in a car. Looking at Parvatheesam he smiled, "How are you now?"

Surprised at this question from Prabhakar, whom he was seeing for the first time, Parvatheesam said, "What is it? I'm quite all right," as though he had been caught doing something wrong.

With a broader smile Prabhakar said, in English, "This morning you weren't really well."

Parvatheesam wondered who had given this stranger the authority to speak so freely to him. His arrogance raised its hood for an instant, then subsided. There couldn't be anyone more helpless than he at that moment. These were good people. At least they were talking to him. At least they were taking an interest in him.

On the way Prabhakar told Parvatheesam, "I heard you need a job. If you don't mind, you can take care of my personal accounts. I'll give you a room in my house. Nobody will disturb you."

Parvatheesam knew he should say thanks, but couldn't bring himself to. "As you like. In my present condition, that is more than I can expect," he said.

After dropping the doctor at her clinic, Prabhakar took Parvatheesam home. His was a big house with a huge compound. It seemed he had a gardener. Different kinds of flowering plants could be seen everywhere. Parvatheesam thought that whatever Prabhakar might or might not be, he certainly was a very rich man.

"My house is a small roadside bungalow. My gardener, cook and a cleaner boy stay here on a permanent basis. I have shares in business houses ranging from cars to cement. If the communists ever come to power, people of my kind will be hanged first. Don't think I'm doing

you a great favour. I'll do anything the doctor asks me to. You can use the room next to the staircase. I'll give you a hundred rupees a month. I'll give you your salary in advance if you ever need it. I won't object to your resigning any time. I don't mind you continuing as long as you like ... This room is specially meant for guests. There's a bed and an attached bath. If you want any special facilities, tell me and I'll provide them," Prabhakar told Parvatheesam, as he handed him ten ten rupee notes.

While Prabhakar spoke, Parvatheesam felt as though scorpions and centipedes were crawling over his body. How could Parvatheesam, tenacity personified, accept money from someone and take on a job that involved practically no work? A suggestion of this kind from anyone, even two days earlier, would have made him furious. But there was no ferocity left in him. This was all his own mistake. The fury that had engulfed him when he had left his daughter's house was the very last. He could be ferocious no more. As one waged a war to stop all further wars, he had been furious for the last time. Where could he go if he declined Prabhakar's offer of a place to stay? Or his offer of money? He could only commit suicide. And that thought was nowhere in Parvatheesam's mind!

So he extended his hand mechanically, took the money, and decided to enter the room Prabhakar had shown him. The gardener came, opened the door and handed him the key.

Parvatheesam relaxed for a while in a chair. Several thoughts kept haunting him but none of consequence. He stepped out, closed the door, locked it, put the key in his pocket and went out to buy clothes for himself.

After coming out of the room, he even toyed with the idea of running away with the money. But that didn't go with his philosophy. That he still had a philosophy of his own baffled him. He roamed the roads for an hour, and finding a khadi shop, went in and bought two

khadi dhotis and two khadi jubbas. Coming upon a hotel close by, he went in, had his food and came home in a leisurely manner.

Though Parvatheesam lay down, he was unable to sleep. He felt drowsy for some time, but that feeling too disappeared quickly with the sound of the car horn and the reflection of its lights on the windowpanes.

Two or three people came walking towards the staircase. From their voices, he guessed that one was the doctor and the other Prabhakar. The third person's voice was inaudible. They went up the stairs. From the sound of their footsteps it seemed each was obstructing the other's movement.

This unmarried doctor, who had saved his life, was not leading a very moral life. She came to another man's house at ten o'clock in the night. And didn't leave till twelve.

The manner in which the doctor laughed as they climbed down the steps and the way Prabhakar shouted Stop, et cetera, made Parvatheesam wonder whether they were drunk. It was the hospitality of such a man that he was enjoying.

Yes. But this doctor was not insulting him. Her behaviour did not concern him. Why was it so? Because he was not an individual in her society. Because he had no place of his own. Because he had no self-respect either.

He had no power whatsoever over her behaviour. He had thought he wielded some power over his daughter but perhaps there too he had no authority! If he told the doctor the next morning that he was leaving, how hurt she would be! Similarly, Vardhani too must have felt hurt when he came away. If she was hurt a little more than that, it was a testimony to her goodness, and not to his authority over her.

When he heard the car start, he was suddenly afraid that in his drunken state Prabhakar might have an accident. What if the doctor was hurt! Just imagining the doctor meeting with an accident troubled him.

His anxiety did not ebb till he heard the car return. Then he tried to think of the doctor's life as he slid into sleep, but slipped into deep slumber.

The next day Parvatheesam finished all his morning chores by seven and was waiting to see Prabhakar. It was past nine when Prabhakar got dressed and came down.

"You seem ready to go out somewhere?" said Prabhakar, looking at the khadi clothes Parvatheesam was wearing.

"I'd like to see the doctor. Could you please drop me off at her clinic?" asked Parvatheesam.

"By all means. Please come."

Prabhakar did not come into the clinic. He had been ordered not to enter it, except as a patient. Parvatheesam did not know this.

Seeing Parvatheesam, the doctor smiled and asked, "How are you? Hope you're feeling perfectly well?"

"I'm all right … If you have ten minutes to spare, I'd like to speak to you about something personal," said Parvatheesam.

"Tell me. I'm not busy right now. I've just finished my round and seen all my patients."

Parvatheesam told her his entire story in brief. He told her about his daughter.

"You can say that I haven't understood life or that I'm pig-headed. I am caught in a mire and don't know what to do. What's your advice? I'm not one who would like to live on your charity. My mental makeup is not like that," he said, finishing his story.

"Go back to your daughter. Let her live as she pleases. You are not able to imagine a life for a woman beyond her being a housewife or a mother. You can't change her life even by a hair's breadth. Why do you interfere with it?" said the doctor.

"But shouldn't human beings have some control? What if

everybody does the same things that a particular person does? Isn't there some criterion to judge people's behaviour?" demanded Parvatheesam.

"Who says so?" the doctor asked. "I don't know what it would be like if everybody became a doctor. Perhaps your daughter never thought what it would be like if everybody was a teacher. It's the same kind of loss for society whether a man like Prabhakar remains unmarried or a women like your daughter and I do. It seems, once upon a time in primitive societies, everyone observed the same principles. It's ridiculous if we live with the same attitudes even today. Right conduct entails doing as much good and as little harm to another human being as one can. Don't believe in false moral principles."

When Parvatheesam set off on his return journey by the Janata Express, there was no trace of any poison whatsoever in his throat.

"Chedipoyina Manishi" was first published in *Andhra Jyoti*, 17 May 1968. This version has been translated from *Kutumbarao Sahityam*, Volume 5, Visalandhra Publishing House, Vijayawada, 1983.

Rachakonda Viswanathasastry

Values

To give me pleasure for twelve minutes the price of that woman, in this commercial age, is a rupee and a half.
The agreement is not fixed by mutual consent, for our contract is a rupee and eight annas.
Depending on person, time, status and purse, the value might increase or decrease.
But what she took from me then was just that.
That's not the truth.
What I gave her was only that much.
If I had given her more, she may not have objected.
Nor would she have quarrelled if I had given her less.
But that's what I could give that day.
That day, I met her at the bus stand, after it was very dark.
At the pakodi stall, the kerosene lamp is shining dimly, fluttering in the wind.
On the white sari she wears, the dim red light is playing hide and seek.
In that light and shade I can't see her soiled red blouse.
But her suppressed shapes provoke irrepressibly.
The paan stained lips twist and turn joyfully.

Below the eyebrows the eyes move mischievously.
The black eyeballs twinkle, make naughty signs.
The fragrance of jasmine hidden in her dark curls smells even better, mingled with the aroma of oil in which the onion pakodis are being cooked.
My eyes rove over her entire body.
Rest on her.
They move on, sliding over the curves which heave and bend.
Move around, not leaving her.
Commotion, noise, sounds, all around.
Her glances pierce the dusky light, the dim darkness and the red dusty air.
They drag me in.
Lots of disturbance around, confusion. Corked soda bottles die slowly.
The wheels of the jutkas are moving only to make noise.
Cycles, rickshaws, cars, buses, carts, human beings.
All, everything together – noise, only noise.
Amidst the noise quietly she calls.
Beckons me to come without actually calling.
Moves without speaking.
I follow her, with a buzz in my heart, with a sole desire, with limitless lust.
We come together in the corner.
I say something though words are unnecessary.
That there is acceptance by both, both know.
No need to specially ask. No need to express.
In the brightness of the gaslight round the corner, she shines. Flushed, she smiles. With desire, she looks.
A rickshaw rushes by, in the meanwhile.
Within moments she and I are in the rickshaw. Next to each other, hand in hand. The strong, rugged, rough hand rouses my desire.

Makes me tremble.
The rickshaw is passing through lanes, not far away, up to the seashore.
The white sand, still slightly warm. Walking, she clings to my shoulder.
Takes my hand and hides it.
Do I ask who she is? Does she need to know who I am?
Walking silently we crash by the fishermen's boats.
Fine sand between boats, smell of sea fish, cool breeze between boats.
She and I.
I am disturbed.
My legs are trembling with uncontrollable desire.
She kisses the trembling me uninhibitedly.
Very strong odour – mixture of cheap soap, cream and face powder.
Smell of damp, soiled, sweaty, red blouse.
All together the smell of a human being.
Maddening, nearly blinding, smell of the woman. Sweet aroma.
I embrace her.
Hands press hard against her.
Her warm breasts respond to the beating of my heart.
Awaken the heart.
A rush of blood breaches banks.
She smiles gently at my unrestrained desire.
Her smile brings moonlight to the dark.
The night is dark.
Pleasantly cool.
I can't see her in the darkness.
Her dark colour like that of a cloud laden with water mingles with the dark night.
But in that darkness I can see nothing but her.
Making a pillow of her full breast, sucking the sweetness of her lips, matching her strength,

I become one with her.
In the presence of the sea. Making moonlight of the moonless sky.
When my blood cools, when I get up and sit down I search and take it out.
It's the purse I take out.
Having taken it out,
I don't know why I feel a chill.
Such a chill. I shiver.
What I've done is not a wrong deed.
What I'm doing now is.
I'm fixing a price on a priceless thing.
I am determining the value of an invaluable thing as of an article in the bazaar.
I'm buying happiness, a woman.
For an anna the packet of pakodi from the shop will come into your hands.
With a rupee and a half one seer of rice will come from darkness to light.
But their prices vary daily, they have their measures, the calculation of the prices is based on their quantity. They are all commodities. But the value of this human being who has been treated as a thing has not been fixed, there has been no bargaining and finding of prices, for alas, it is one of the commodities in the world which has no fixed price.
I remember while taking the purse out.
To satisfy my desire to rent a woman
I did not find out the price in advance.
This thing which has to sell itself is the meanest of things, the lowest of the low.
I take out my purse.
She is not looking at me.

Behind her red blouse her black breasts are hiding themselves.
She is arranging the pleats of her white sari.
Her rugged hands are searching in the sand for the jasmine garland.
My hands are searching for the change in the purse.
The three half rupee coins which came into my fist have now gone to her waist.
She accepts them quietly.
Thereafter, for the last time she pulls me close with her hands and kisses me.
She smiles, with an inexplicable happiness.
But with sadness and with a sense of shame caused by humiliation.
I too hug her and hide myself.
For having insulted her that night. Not just her, for having humiliated the female race.
Not just the female race, for having disgraced humanity.
For having degraded myself, her, and everything.
For dishonouring even that heavenly pleasure bestowed on human beings by God without their asking for it so that human life can continue endlessly. Instead of subjecting me and my race to her terrible, inescapable curse or crushing me under her feet and reducing me to dust, or flinging me into flames and reducing me to ashes, she hugs me softly with her strong hands, pulls me close to her heaving breasts and kisses me sweetly with her warm lips!
But in excusing me thus, knowingly or unknowingly, with her natural womanly nature in taking me in and in comforting me she shows her greatness.
She takes her greatness beyond the skies.
She showers moonbeams over me who lies down below and who is sliding further down.
She gives me a helping hand and lifts me up. She shows me the woman's heart.

And finally she goes away into that darkness somewhere.
In this commercial age, in the market without prices, one night, the value of that priceless thing, is a rupee and a half!

"Viluvalu" was first published in *Vinodini* around 1949-50. This version has been translated from *Nalugarlu*, Rachakonda Prachuranalu, Visakhapatnam, 1994 (1987).

Sivaraju Subbulakshmi

It has Dawned

The surroundings are clothed in mist, like darkness draping a white sari around itself. Mallikamba has not had a wink of sleep in four days. It's sunrise again. With unresolved thoughts, with a mind that has lost its edge, drained of the strength to come to any decision, her heart is groaning with disgust. Two years have passed since she married the master of the house, walking behind him with her wet parani-smeared feet, holding the edge of his yellow dhoti. Nobody has experienced the pangs of hunger in this household.

Occasionally, fatigue is visible through the thin clothes of Bhupalarao, well past middle age. He remembers what happened two years ago.

Though Mallikamba was not all that old, her body was well developed. Her youthfully plump, tall body, her large eyes, her meek words from behind the screen – Bhupalarao had observed all these when he saw her for the first time in a relative's backyard.

His worldly-wise aunt had promptly conveyed what she thought she read in that glance to the mother of the girl.

The mother, who had forgotten her position for a while, rebuffed

the proposal initially, but recovered from the shock and eventually agreed. Though Bhupalarao outwardly said No, he convinced himself there was nothing wrong in marrying again. His eldest son opposed the marriage and created a scene saying he would never again step into his father's house. In a year's time he had changed his mind and returned.

Mallikamba's brother wrote a sad letter informing their mother was very ill. Mallikamba realized how long she had cried reading the letter only when she came to her senses hearing Bhupalarao's voice.

"What did you do with that money?" he was shouting. "Why did you require that money? My pedda koduku says he has seen you taking it. Bring it back. Quick."

His other children, seeing Bhupalarao shout at Mallikamba, watched her and, pretending complete innocence, used it as an excellent opportunity to attack her. "Nanna, see how innocent she looks! She must have done it to throw the blame on our annayya," said Subhadra, the younger daughter, egging him on.

By the time Bhupalarao's anger subsided, Mallikamba had been drained of all energy.

In the night, stepping onto the veranda, she closes her eyes in the lap of darkness. Her mother's image moves in her mind. Amma's sympathetic eyes are looking at her. Mallikamba can do little but feel sad thinking of her. Mallikamba spends the day without eating anything, saddened by the thought that though there are so many people in the house, nobody comes to look for her except the cook, who calls her at mealtimes.

Bhupalarao comes to the dimly lit veranda in search of Mallikamba. Seeing her lying motionless on the floor he is contrite.

He sits apart, not knowing how to console her. Moving close, he is unable to speak, and stops after saying, "Malli, your amma …"

She gets over her exhaustion, brought on by not having eaten anything, and picks up a new energy from sorrow. She cries loudly, looking wildly in every direction. On hearing Bhupalarao say, "I have got the cart ready. Will you go home?" she is reminded of her father. She takes Bhupalarao's suggestion like a child whose anger has cooled and gets ready to leave.

As the cart reaches the outskirts of her old town, the sun is setting behind the palms. The village looks sad, like darkness sitting at the foot of the trees.

She remembers having come to the village with her father at that very hour when she was really young. The children who met them at the bodhi tree had screamed, "Nanna's here!" The happiness of the older people, the faces of the men walking up to the house with mirrored lamps – all these scenes come up, one by one, in her memory.

Mallikamba is jolted back into the world by the cart driver's question, "Amma, which way shall I turn?" and she tells him briefly that he has to cross the bridge.

She hears the dry cries of her elder sister who must have heard the cart stop. In no state to go in, she collapses on the steps and tries to contain her sorrow. The neighbours gather around to console her. While some express displeasure and say that had she helped in time, her mother would have survived, some console her saying, "It's an illusion. Who can prevent what is bound to happen? Things happen and days go by. Happy or sad things happen in rich homes in a particular way and in this place, like an oil-fed torch, slowly burning out."

Akkayya has no problems. She is comfortably placed. Wasn't it after her marriage that Nanna became bedridden? When her mother was alive, Mallikamba's sister had not visited her. But now she is acting so sad. Not only had she not attended Mallikamba's marriage, but had also written saying that news about it need not be conveyed to

her. She recalls her mother speaking to herself once, that though their father had starved them, he had at least given her sister some land. Another time she heard her mother say that they wouldn't have been poverty stricken had her father been alive.

Mallikamba remembers all these things.

She is pained to see her younger brother's condition.

If only her sister would take him with her. How she wishes she had the freedom to do so in her house! She would have kept her brother in her house. But she is reminded again of the day the money was lost and putting an end to all her thoughts goes towards the house to meet her sister.

Seeing her sister whisper to Ramayamma by the tulasi plant, Mallikamba stops at the end of the lane, reluctant to speak to her.

Ramayamma is listening to her sister with a stunned expression.

"Go and tell Nayudu what I tell you. Why do I need to come here if this is sold? Will the house here feed us anyway? Am I not right?" says her sister as she undoes the clasps of her ornaments.

Mallikamba coughs and approaches slowly. Not knowing how to begin the conversation, she gazes at the roof.

"I've sent word to Nayudu to deduct whatever is to be paid to clear the loan against the house and calculate the balance," the elder sister blurts out to the younger one.

"If we sell even the house, where will Nagu stay?" Mallikamba says, wiping her eyes.

"Even if we retain the house, how will it feed him? Moreover, some more money is due to your baavagaru."

When Mallikamba hears her sister speak this way, she feels as if hot winds are scorching her ears.

Mallikamba mumbles, "I don't remember Amma ever saying that they owed Baavagaru any money."

"How does it matter if money is due to us or not? We haven't taken

anything. Don't you know the house is in Amma's name and that Nanna used to say it will go to all three of us? Your baavagaru is insisting on that. Also, our young boy has wasted a lot of money without his father's knowledge. If I don't put back that money, your baavagaru will strangle me," the elder sister goes on grumbling discontentedly.

"What do we lack? What if it is in Amma's name? We shouldn't be desperate for that money. Poor fellow, who'll give him anything!" Mallikamba expresses her concern.

"Because you have an old husband …" her sister is about to say, but bites her tongue, stops short and goes on, "Your husband may be giving you whatever you need. Though I have a lot, your baavagaru doesn't let me take even a paisa. I have children. Why should I lose what I can get?"

The next morning her sister sends for Ramayya, and does what she has wanted to do all along, insists on Mallikamba taking her share of five hundred rupees, says Nagu's education costs nothing, puts a copper pot in her basket – a token remembrance of her mother – cries loudly for the world to see, and gets into the cart!

Mallikamba's sorrow doesn't surface. But something keeps tormenting her from within. She sends for Ramayya again and tells him he should take the responsibility of seeing that her share is made over to her brother, and to ensure that he is educated.

The bells tied to the bullocks sent by Bhupalarao are jangling noisily outside the house. Unable to leave her brother, and feeling emotionally spent, Mallikamba hands over everything to the darkness of the evening and gets onto the cart. This time she doesn't feel like leaving the village. She convinces herself that after all Nagu is not a small child, that things will be all right, and that perhaps what her sister did was correct. Nagu can go to college with the money. Mother had stopped his education a year ago, unable to spend more money on him even though he had passed his exams. Mallikamba is resigned to

the fact that she has to depend on Ramayya to see that he is educated.

Just as the east shakes off its lethargy by lessening the darkness, the bodies of men move about lithe as sages in the breaking light of dawn. Mallikamba's heart seems to lighten inexplicably. Her sorrow for her mother vanishes into thin air, like water evaporating. But then she thinks of her brother who has been left alone. She recalls her mother's words, Poor thing! I wish human beings didn't experience sorrow. To attain such knowledge one needs to work hard, and is jolted back into the world.

The cart stops in front of her house. The bullocks shake their heads sounding their bells, looking sideways and conveying their wish to be unyoked. Mallikamba goes into her house through the back door. A flight of parrots quarrel, soar and perch again on the guava tree.

Papamma, her nextdoor neighbour, comes over wiping her eyes and enquires across the broken wall between the houses about the death of Mallikamba's mother.

Mallikamba, sorrowful, her voice choked, cannot speak. She moves closer to the wall and pours out her sorrow through gestures. Though the people at home are moving about, no one speaks to her or acknowledges her presence. All of them are busy doing their own thing. It is late by the time Bhupalarao comes home. His voice is heard from the street. Mallikamba doesn't go to receive him. She can hear him in the next room, asking his younger daughter, "Has your pinni come?"

"It seems she has. But is she bothered about things at home? She spends her time standing near the wall between the houses."

"All right."

The curtness in his voice discourages further conversation.

That day, the dark evening twilight is dull at their doorstep. Lamps are lit all over the house. People come to fix up the marriage of the

younger daughter. The older sister scolds the girl who is crying because she doesn't want to get married at all. On that day, exactly a year after the incident in Mallikamba's life, kindness creeps into Bhupalarao's heart. He is tired of people recounting the incident at home. He hands over the bunch of keys to Mallikamba and asks her to take on the burden of managing the house.

Though the daughters, bitter about their father's decision, go away to their maama's house for a while, they have no choice but to come back.

The older daughter's demands increase beyond measure on the pretext of the younger sister's marriage. To make things easier, she brings home Bhadramma, a distant relative. On the pretext of orthodox practices, Bhadramma ensures that nobody comes anywhere near the kitchen.

Bhadramma's authority keeps increasing as the wedding day approaches – finding fault with Mallikamba for everything, whispering to the children, complaining about Mallikamba and telling the visitors secretly about her mismanagement of the house – Mallikamba hears all these but pretends not to.

The elder daughter is not able to tolerate the way Mallikamba ensures that the bunch of keys is always with her, even as she goes about her other duties. When anyone asks Mallikamba if they could take out the vessel to keep the sandalwood paste, or the perfume bottle, she replies that these have already been taken out, and quickly moves away. When Bhadramma observes this, she comes up with a new plan.

"How can she exercise control over your amma's money or your nanna's wealth? I don't understand all this. Do as I advise you," she goads them.

The marriage party is to leave the next morning. Everyone is running up and down. The veranda is bustling with activity.

Bhupalarao calls out to Mallikamba for the keys to the iron safe.

Mallikamba pulls them out from her waist and hurls them across. She steps into the room as the purohit shouts, "Please call Bhupalarao."

The elder daughter goes on complaining. Bhadramma swears. The elder son-in-law finds fault with everything. Bhupalarao dusts the baskets and scolds his daughter while counting them.

"The purohit is calling." Hearing Mallikamba's soft voice, everybody turns in her direction. Bhadramma signals with her eyes. The elder daughter bursts into tears on cue. The elder son-in-law silences his wife. But Bhadramma starts to speak. Unable to follow her, Bhupalarao looks at Mallikamba. He hears the commotion made by the purohit in the pandal and goes there.

"She made the elder son-in-law lock the room ..." Bhadramma alleges, drawing the elder daughter close and consoling her. She has revealed just enough of the secret to all the visitors present for them to interpret it in their own ways. "Have you heard of what's happened?" is heard differently by different people, though they all know it is Bhadramma's making.

"Anyway, how does it concern you?" a distant relative asks Bhadramma.

"Isn't it because she didn't have enough to eat that she was eager to marry him, even though he had so many children? I get wild when she behaves as though her self-respect has been injured when I say this. She doesn't even respond when she is spoken to – as though she has come from a royal household. Perhaps she is proud of the fact that she is able to please an old man!" Bhadramma's hatred of Mallikamba is obvious.

"Whatever it is, I don't understand what you get out of inciting the children. Oh the infamy! The blame would have been on me if that girl had decamped with the money," says the old relative, her eyes widening in surprise as she stares at Bhadramma.

"I don't know what's the matter," says another woman who is a bit conservative, slumping on to the floor.

"Nothing new, nothing to be surprised. The girl opened the iron safe to take some of her amma's things out. The pinni came like Tataki, with the support of the nanna…" Bhadramma finishes speaking.

"It's not just that, I believe. It seems they packed all the notes in the box. How much has she given you?" says another grey-haired woman slyly, brushing her hair with her fingers.

"Ei, if you want to do things like that, go ahead. But don't talk so cheaply about me! Even if I don't have anything, I am not one to demean myself for money. You know I agreed to come here only because I was asked to give moral support. If I had such qualities, I would have got Kantamma married to him," Bhadramma says, protecting her integrity.

"Whatever you may say, it seems Kantamma eloped with someone without listening to you," reveals the conservative woman.

Bhadramma's anger and sorrow at this revelation is evident and those who had earlier flocked around hurriedly scatter away saying, "How does it concern us?"

Though the relatives start moving away one by one, Bhadramma doesn't budge. Whatever others feel, I won't go unless the younger daughter comes back, she tells herself every now and then.

Bhupalarao is seen resting on a cot under the pandal. From a distance, Mallikamba seems to be hiding a smile behind the edge of her sari. "If things had gone right, Kantamma would have been in her position today," Bhadramma rants, bemoaning the lost opportunity. When luck is to be hers, how could Kantamma get it? she thinks, cursing Mallikamba in her mind.

The younger daughter returns with Kantamma in tow. The moment she sees Kantamma, Bhadramma forgets her sorrow, and

hoarsely enquires about her welfare. Kantamma says she has no difficulties, argues that she has not done anything untoward and is annoyed with Bhadramma. Mallikamba listens to all this from the doorstep.

Bhadramma chides Mallikamba, "This is not a roadside show. Mind your own business."

"Why are you interfering in her affairs?" Kantamma chides Bhadramma in turn, takes Mallikamba by her hand and says, "Come and sit here. Don't bother about what she says."

Even though the elder daughter doesn't like Kantamma going around the whole house, enquiring about this and that, talking to everybody and putting them at ease, she keeps quiet thinking Bhadramma may take it amiss.

Bhupalarao doesn't like Kantamma moving around freely in his house. He asks Bhadramma why Kantamma should have come at all.

Bhadramma brushes his question aside saying, "Who is that?" as though she doesn't know who he's talking about.

Even as he says, "Your manavaralu, your granddaughter," Kantamma arrives.

"Maama is asking me why you've come here," says Bhadramma.

"Why do you ask me why I've come? To see you, of course. By the way, your pedda koduku said he would be here the day before yesterday itself," Kantamma says. Guessing that perhaps he had not arrived, she says, biting her lip, "When I saw him at the station, I asked him where he was going. He told me then that he was coming here."

Bhupalarao is confused and says, "His life's as messy as mine. So, he may have spoken like that," and quickly goes to the backyard.

"Not satisfied with marrying a girl closer in age to his son, he is finding fault with others," Kantamma laughs senselessly, loud enough to blow off the roof.

"Stop it," Bhadramma grinds her teeth.

"Actually, maama should have been married to a woman as old as you," says Kantamma as she laughs uncontrollably.

"You wicked girl!" says Bhadramma, disappearing into the kitchen.

Hearing the commotion in the street signalling the arrival of Bhupalarao's elder son, Kantamma steps out.

"You'd left then and are returning only now," say the two sisters.

"Who cares about me anyway?" He stares at Kantamma as he is about to enter the front room when, seeing his father approach from the opposite direction, he stands with his head bent.

"Please, now that he has come, don't say anything to him," the younger daughter exhorts her father.

Bhadramma, covering herself fully with her sari, comes out hastily and says, "Come, dear. Come. You've come to my house, haven't you?" She makes her way through all the people.

"You're making a lot of fuss here," Kantamma laughs, having a dig at Bhadramma.

Bhupalarao stares angrily at Kantamma and goes in.

When everybody joins Kantamma's laughter Bhupalarao feels as if somebody has hit him on the spine.

Mallikamba looks on uncomprehendingly.

She has to show Bhupalarao the letter her brother Nagu has written but she is waiting for the right opportunity. She is scared what he might say if she mentions anything about money, and therefore keeps quiet.

"He has come. Be careful with the keys, you understand?" Bhupalarao says, looking in Mallikamba's direction.

Temptation flashes across her mind like lightning.

The keys in her hand move. Her feet grow cold with fear.

"I don't know. It's better you keep them with you," she says, her hands shivering, about to hand them over to him.

"It was my suspicion that made me act the way I did earlier," Bhupalarao admits. He remembers the past, feels bad, and makes Mallikamba sit next to him.

Not knowing what she will do if she gives in to temptation, Mallikamba returns the keys.

Bhupalarao asks her to take the money from her waist and put it in the box.

She is taking the money out. She is giving him an account. She is putting it in again. All kinds of evil thoughts race through her head. She keeps closing the box and coming away lacking the courage each time. It's already four days since she received the letter from Nagu. There is not much time left. If Ramayya had given him his money, she would not have had this problem. Why did he have to use up only her brother's money? She has lost faith in Ramayya's integrity. Maybe, everyone feels like pocketing money when they see it. If it had been some other time, she would have been able to tell Bhupalarao.

Now even his elder son is around. One could never tell when he would create a fuss and how much money he would demand. Not just the father, everyone is scared of him.

Papamma, her nextdoor neighbour, calls out to say she is going to her village. If she wants to send money to her brother, that's the only way.

Where does she have the money? Her mind burns with these thoughts and she is unable to sleep.

Bhupalarao will not keep the money with himself beyond the next morning. He has promised to give it to somebody. His elder son-in-law is calling out, standing in the darkness. Hearing Bhupalarao say, "Open the box again and bring the bag I've given you," Mallikamba goes in with the keys. She suspends her thoughts, stuffs the notes she has taken out from the drawer into her blouse, locks the box and comes away.

Bhupalarao goes to the side-door to see his elder son-in-law off.

Mallikamba climbs onto the stone next to the wall between the houses and looks into Papamma's house. She finds Papamma arranging things in the house in the light of a small lamp. Not able to speak aloud, she rustles a dry palm leaf. Papamma lifts the lamp, looks up and comes to the backyard saying, "Who's there?"

Hot air seems to course through Mallikamba's body. Her hands and feet feel dry. She is so scared her heart will beat too fast and then stop altogether that she keeps pressing a hand against it. She is panting and unable to complete her sentence, "This is for Nagu …"

"Aren't you well? You're panting," Papamma begins to say. But Mallikamba sees Bhupalarao coming back and signals with her hand that either she is going or Papamma shouldn't tell anyone about it, and gets off the stone. Papamma stands for a while in the dim light of the lamp not understanding what she means, and then goes in.

Mallikamba is not able to sleep. She even thinks of calling Papamma again and taking back the money. But what if Bhupalarao gets up? While she is scared and not able to make up her mind, time ticks on, towards the brightness of morning. Papamma's getting onto the cart, the bullocks beginning to move … she feels as if they are moving over her body. She used to be fond of the breaking of dawn. But now she is troubled. Why did she do it? Could she have kept quiet? Meaningless worries disturb her mind.

It's around the time Bhupalarao wakes up. The chief farmhand is panting and shouting, and is calling out to his master. Everything else is quiet.

"The doors at the back are open and I found this bag near the cattle," he says, throwing a knitted cloth bag towards him.

Wiping his sleepy eyes, Bhupalarao takes the bag without a word and sits on the veranda.

Bhadramma stands stunned for a while and suddenly starts beating

her chest shouting, "Who has done this, babu? I know nothing of it."

The elder son-in-law comes and takes his father-in-law in. Mallikamba stands immobile, holding on to the guava tree. It's the same cloth bag from which she has taken out the money. What's happened to the rest? She is not able to guess.

The elder son-in-law calls out to Mallikamba. She moves in slowly, her chest heavy with fear.

Bhupalarao turns his face away saying, "What would she know, that one? She had locked the box, hadn't she?" And with that Mallikamba feels somewhat relieved.

"It seems the work of Kantamma and my pedda koduku," Bhupalarao says to Mallikamba.

But the elder son-in-law appears to be reading the fear in her mind.

Her speech is shaky. She wants to find out how much has been lost. "Two bags have disappeared, some money may have already been spent," the elder son-in-law says and his words prick her conscience. She feels that the punishment she received the first time, for a crime she had not committed, was nothing compared to this. Now her conscience torments her.

Even as time passes, her mind is not able to reconcile itself.

The elder son-in-law too seems to stare at her constantly.

As she dwells upon her tainted heart, the sun rises.

"Tellavarindi" was first published in *Kavyasundari Katha*, Adarsha Grandha Mandali, Vijayawada, 1967. This version has been translated from *Poolajallu: Vividha Rachayitala Katha Samputi*, ed. Amarasri, Secunderabad, 1970.

Abburi Chaya Devi

Bonsai Life

The moment I see letters waiting for me on the doorstep when I return from work, I can't contain my excitement. It's almost as if I'm face to face with my near and dear ones and they are speaking affectionately to me. Instantly the exhaustion of office work vanishes and my heart grows light. Instead of entering the kitchen muttering, Oh no, oh God – which is what I usually do when I come back tired – I feel like singing a song, humming a tune, making a nice cup of coffee and savouring each sip. What is more, the sight of inland letters or envelopes in a familiar hand gives me the energy and enthusiasm to quickly make and eat some pakodis or bajjis! Even though I am lazy about writing letters I love to receive one from some place or the other, every day.

This is an unexpected letter. If my akkayya, who doesn't normally write, went out of her way to write a letter, there has to be a reason. As I open the letter, I am a little apprehensive. I hope it is not bad news. Actually, when things are fine, no one bothers to write …

Ammalu!

You must be very surprised to receive my letter. You

> would be even more surprised if I were to tell you that your baavagaru and I are coming to your place. We have been planning for quite a while to visit Kasi and Haridwar. We have now found the time. I hope you won't find our visit inconvenient …

"My dear, it seems Akkayya and Baavagaru are coming over," I said to my husband excitedly.

"Is that true? When? Where is it? Give me the letter," he said and pulled the letter from my hand. I went into the kitchen to get the coffee and other things ready.

Akkayya and Baavagaru were coming to this city and our home for the first time since my marriage. I had looked forward to their visit all these years. They had never left their little village to go anywhere. Using children, cattle, cooking, et cetera, as excuses, they had always avoided moving out. Under such circumstances, imagine their coming to our house and to this big city!

Akkayya is not as educated as I. By "Not as educated" I mean Nannagaru did not let her study after Class Five. Of what use was education for a girl? Those were the days when people thought it was enough if a girl was able to keep the washerman's accounts. A decade later, when I was born, there wasn't much debate as to whether a girl should have an education or not. I was lucky that my father changed with the times. He didn't even hesitate to send me to college. No girl who is well educated can be satisfied with staying at home, being a housewife and looking after the household after marriage. She would want to put her education to good use and achieve something in life. I too was driven by the same desire. Even though my husband had a good job, I took up one as well.

Because Akkayya was not educated, she was married to a man from the village. Though my baavagaru was educated, his ideals made him

choose agriculture as his profession and he settled down in the village to cultivate his land. Akkayya grew accustomed to village life.

Akkayya brought so many things – cucumber, gongura, drumsticks, appadams, vadiyams and coconuts. "I hope you don't mind, I have brought you all these things, like Kuchela. I don't know whether you'll like them or not," she said, rather hesitantly.

"Why do you say that? You've actually brought all the things we wanted! We don't get these things here. If your maridi has gongura pulusu, cucumber pappu, and drumstick charu he feels as elated as if he has had a sumptuous feast! With my office work, I am unable to make appadams and vadiyams. Even if I have some free time, I am too lazy to do such work. You know me, don't you?" I said with a laugh.

"That's true, but by the time you come back from office you must be dead tired. How can you then prepare appadams and vadiyams and make idlis and dosas? I don't know how you are able to manage work at home and in the office," Akkayya consoled me.

"What a wretched job! Sometimes, I feel like giving it up. You know, people say solve your problems at home before you solve those outside. To neglect work at home and look after office work is an uphill task for a woman," I said, speaking from experience.

"Don't think like that, Ammalu. How fortunate you are! Touchwood! You've studied well, have a job like a man and are earning very well. You don't have to beg anyone for anything. You are able to lead a dignified life unlike us who have to depend on our husbands even for a few paise worth of karivepaku," said Akkayya.

The grass is greener on the other side, I thought to myself. "What's your daughter doing now?" I asked, changing the topic.

"She's in her final year at school. If by God's grace she clears her exams, I am determined to send her to college. Your baavagaru doesn't really like the idea of sending her to the next town and putting her in a hostel. But I don't like to keep a girl at home without educating her.

Isn't what I'm going through enough? In these times, if a woman doesn't have a degree, she'll come to nothing. Without it, she will have to live under her husband's thumb, like a scorpion under a slipper," she said.

From the very start Akkayya had been keen on studying. But Nannagaru didn't educate her. Because she was not adept at oral arithmetic, Nannagaru had said, "Ah, she's a girl, how will studies get into her head?" and had made her discontinue her lessons, concentrating only on Annayya's education. Because she was uneducated, she got married to a man from the village, had to look after the cattle, keep the stove clean, draw water from the well ... Amma used to be very upset that Akkayya had to go through such drudgery. Realizing that Akkayya was upset thinking of the past, and in an attempt to divert her mind, I led her to the balcony saying, "Come, let's go and sit outside."

Looking at the plants in the flowerpots Akkayya mentioned that all the cucumbers, drumsticks and gongura were from their own backyard. I asked her to send some gongura seeds the next time someone came this way.

"But, Ammalu, what's this? Why have you planted the turayi and pomegranate trees in these flowerpots? See, how stunted they have become! If, like flower plants, you put these trees in pots instead of letting them grow freely in the backyard, how will they grow?" she asked, surprised, feeling sorry for the trees.

I burst into laughter. Akkayya was perplexed.

"I did it on purpose. It's a special method. It's called bonsai in Japan. You can grow even a huge banyan tree in a flowerpot. You can grow it even with its roots hanging down from the branches. You have no idea how beautiful a pomegranate tree looks when you keep cutting its branches, changing the pot now and then, trimming it into a small-sized tree and making it bear fruit! Do you know how

carefully you have to tend this small tree? Bonsai is a great art," I said.

But it seemed as if Akkayya didn't appreciate what I said. "I don't know. You have confined a turayi tree to a flowerpot when it could have grown to the height of a building," she sighed.

Feeling disheartened at being unable to impress Akkayya with my bonsai, I collapsed weakly into a chair. I was most distressed – as if the entire art I had learnt had come to naught. It was like throwing perfume into ash. Suddenly a dust storm began to rage. The sand hit our faces harshly. I caught hold of Akkayya's shoulder and dragged her into the room. Then I closed the doors and windows in a hurry.

Akkayya was stunned.

"What's all this? Everything was normal till now. Where did that dust and wind come from suddenly? You have tar roads too," she said.

"This is how it is in this big city, my dear. Before we know what is happening, the storm brings all the sand from the Rajasthan desert and hits our face ..." I had not completed my sentence when I could hear the rain beginning to fall. I opened the door and pulled the bonsai tree pots and flowerpots inside, under the canopy. Akkayya opened a side window and looked at the streets to observe the weather in the Indian capital. "Look, Ammalu, look there," she said. A new enthusiasm seemed to have crept into her voice. I looked eagerly through the window towards the street. I couldn't understand what she meant. I looked at her and said, "What is it?"

"Look at that tree ... look at how many people are standing under it without getting wet," she said, as if it was something out of the ordinary. I saw nothing unusual in it. Realizing that I had not understood what she was getting at, she said again, "Look how tall that turayi has grown. Out in the open, see how freely it has grown. However powerful the sandstorm, it hasn't bowed a little bit. Moreover,

it has provided shelter to so many people, and is protecting them. Imagine how many would find respite from the hot sun under its shade!"

"What's so surprising about that?" I asked.

"Not that it is surprising, Ammalu. Look at the bonsai you have tended so lovingly! It looks proper and sweet, like a housewife. But see how delicate it is. You have to tend it very carefully. It can't even withstand a small dust storm or squall. When it is dependent on someone, how can it provide shelter to anyone? Isn't it because of the difference in the way one brings up a boy and a girl, that a woman's life is like that of a bonsai?"

My heart was touched by Akkayya's words. Just as one frees a bird from a cage to let it fly, I felt the urge to free the bonsai trees from their flowerpots.

"Bonsai Bratuku" was first published in *Kalpana*, September 1974. This version has been translated from *Telugu Katha: An Anthology of Telugu Short Stories*, Sahitya Akademi, 1988, New Delhi.

Kethu Viswanathareddy

Wings

One could make out from their height and the way they moved that the three in khaki clothes were women. They stood along with an old constable glancing this way and that, in front of the police station. Beside them were three bags. Like us, they too seemed to have been assigned election duty. The moment the lorry supposed to take us on our route arrived, the three girls picked up their bags and stood behind it. They were about twenty or twenty five years old. Not much older than my eldest daughter, who was at home. These girls were doing things my daughters could never do. It felt good. But what if they ran into trouble doing this kind of duty, the poor things? I was scared for them. I was used to being suspicious, aware of the problems they faced, and wary as a father of girls.

Leaning against the rear corner of the lorry and looking at them, I began to wonder. The girl standing in front raised her head, and looking straight at me, said to her friends, "Let's ask them to open the back door of the lorry."

I too thought it would be a good idea to open the door. I looked at the people in the lorry. The Presiding Officers and Assistant Presiding Officers were engrossed in their discussions. Our Presiding Officer,

who was not involved in the discussion, was cheerfully smoking a cigarette. The driver didn't switch off the engine, neither did he get down. The cleaner too didn't budge. The officer in charge of the route was perhaps in the cabin. The constable seemed to have had a word with someone and come back. Not knowing what to do, I was looking this way and that.

"Here, like this … stupid! Didn't you climb tamarind trees when you were young?" saying so, the girl who was standing at the back came forward.

The old constable warned her gruffly, "Careful! Careful, tallee! You're always in a hurry. You might slip and fall. At least get a stool from the station and then climb up."

By then The girl who was always in a hurry had managed a foothold on the lorry. Bending over the back door and stretching out her hand, she said, "Slip and fall? Is this a bathroom, Saar? I don't need a stool or anything. Mmm, girls, first get hold of those bags."

The two girls standing below handed the three bags to her. I helped the girl into the lorry and put her bag on one side, next to the gunny sack containing the election material for our polling station.

"Ah, now get in. The two of you are a class by yourselves. I don't know what kind of Homeguards you are. Terrified even when you control traffic! And now you are going to handle security in those villages! But what can be done? This is how the present age is! What is our country coming to? Get in now. Ei! First hold my hand tight. Put your right foot firmly on that step, hold the rod with the left hand and haul yourself up." Speaking fast and laughing at the same time, The girl who was always in a hurry pulled the other two, one by one, into the lorry.

Our Presiding Officer Nageswararao, sitting comfortably in front of the gunny sack, seemed to have found this amusing. He came and sat on the gunny sack next to me. One of the girls muttered, "Is this the way to Timmasamudram?"

"What's that, great one? Did you think this was the route to the Indian Ocean? You always seem to have some doubt or the other. You can't do anything without having a doubt. You're the one who saw the nameplate on the lorry. Our pulav loving officer told us too. After we've reached I hope you won't ask whether it is Nayudukandriga, or they'll snatch your cap away! We're not even the regular police for the poor, voiceless people to get scared of. Look here, Saar!" The girl who was always in a hurry said to me.

What could I say? I was used to my daughters' cowardice. I thought of saying, Everyone can't be brave, but merely laughed and kept quiet. The girl too responded with a laugh. She turned around and was soon busy talking to her friends. I couldn't but appreciate the gregarious nature of The girl who was always in a hurry. Though the police constable said she was always in a hurry, I didn't think so. She seemed to have a lot of determination.

She was slim, of medium height, with a thin long face, a lovely nose and a wheatish complexion. Perhaps not a beauty who would stand out in a crowd, but there was something attractive about her face. One could see brightness, mischief, dignity and abandon in her eyes. In her less serious conversations, there was a certain impishness that was very attractive. I thought she was a sprightly girl.

The lorry left town and was moving along slowly on the dusty Timmasamudram road. The sprightly girl stopped speaking to her friends and asked, "What's your polling station, Saar?"

Nageswararao, who seemed to be waiting for an opportunity to talk to her, quickly intervened, "Both of us are posted at Eruvapalem. I'm the Presiding Officer, he is the Assistant Presiding Officer."

The girl looked Nageswararao up and down and asked, "Eruvapalem Harijanawada, Saar?"

"Yes, that's the one," I said.

"I've also been put on duty there, Saar," said the girl.

"You … you have?" Nageswararao was surprised.

"Yes, Saar. I've been put on duty. Just like you. Just like all of them," she said, pointing to the rest of us.

"How many police personnel have been put on duty in our polling station?"

"Why, Saar? It seems you won't perform your election duty if they don't appoint at least ten police personnel there."

Another Presiding Officer said, "Don't worry, the polling stations on this route have no problems."

The arts college lecturer, who was our Presiding Officer in the last election, turned to Nageswararao and said, "Don't worry. Your APO will do all that is needed and will look after everything. I know this from the last election. He is a bit serious, but so what? He's exceptional in his work. All you have to do is sit and sign the ballot papers."

"I don't like handing over the entire responsibility to a lower officer. The senior should be very alert and observant and get the work done," Nageswararao said, with all the arrogance of a Presiding Officer, looking towards the sprightly girl.

The lecturer looked at me, laughed, and then joined in the conversation of friends sitting next to him.

It took more than an hour to reach the first polling station, which was on a diversion off the Timmasamudram route. One of the girls got off there with the Presiding Officer and the Assistant Presiding Officer of that station. Sitting in the lorry, our Homeguard called out to the Route Officer and said, "Saar! Route Officer, Saar! She's very timid. Ask everyone to treat her well."

"Okay, okay," the Route Officer assured her.

Looking at our Homeguard I thought all girls should be as caring as she was.

We got back onto the main road and travelled for another hour. When it was time for the lecturer and the suspicious Homeguard to alight, our

Homeguard told him, "Saar, Saar! She is a suspicious person. Don't misunderstand what she says and look after her as if she were one of you."

"We'll do that!" he answered, laughing.

"Thank heaven! These two have been settled. Now we are the ones left. How much further? It's about to get dark," the sprightly Homeguard said, pretending to speak to herself but looking in my direction.

I didn't know how much further we had to go. Ours was the last polling station on this route. So I didn't reply.

Nageswararao struck up a conversation with the girl. Now there were only the three of us in the lorry. Even though I didn't want to listen to him, I got the gist. First, in one or two short sentences, he praised her sincerity to her job and duty. Then he reeled off, one by one, the particulars of his education, his job, his status, his superiors, his likes, et cetera. He said that he had done BE from the Kakinada Engineering College, that he was the student chairman in his college days, that he belonged to a place near Tadepalli Gudem, that his was a wealthy and influential family, that it was five years since he had joined the Roads and Buildings Department, that the people from his area were very cultured, that he was surprised to find that level of culture only in her among all those people. I don't know what mood she was in, but she listened to him without snapping. I wondered whether she heard him at all.

By the time we reached our polling station, Eruvapalem Harijanawada, darkness was closing in. Our polling booth was a school building half a kilometre from Harijanawada. We passed Eruvapalem which had no buildings, passed Malawada and crossed Harijanawada to reach the polling booth. When the lorry stopped, Nageswararao was the first to get off. He asked me to hand him his briefcase. I gave it to him. Without saying a word, he walked some distance in the school compound, stood there and stretched himself, then lit a cigarette. To unload the two gunny sacks containing the election material, to bring

my small suitcase down, to bring her own bag down, it was The girl who was always in a hurry, The sprightly girl, The female Homeguard, who helped me. I then took the liberty of asking her name.

"Pankajam," she said.

The Route Officer, impatient to get into the lorry and drive off, said, "The teacher of this school is the polling officer. I had told him yesterday before we left to stay on till we come and to make all the arrangements. You wait here. I'll go and send the person over. The sarpanch has been admitted to the Vellore Hospital. The village munsifs and karnams are absconding. We are left to bear the burden."

While he was speaking, the schoolteacher showed up with two children holding lanterns. After speaking to him, the Route Officer left.

The children carried our things to the room. It was a long room with doors on either side. Almost all the windows were broken. Inside were two tables, two chairs with broken arms, and two benches. The box containing the school records was kept locked in a corner. To the left, two bedsheets were strung across two poles – the polling booth!

Nageswararao made the children drag both the benches near the left wall and thus made his bed for the night. Then he sat on the chair and began to go through his briefcase. Pankajam put her bag down near the right wall. I placed my small suitcase in the middle.

After walking around the room, looking at the faded photographs of national leaders nailed to the wall and silently reading the sayings framed around the room, Pankajam stopped and suddenly read one of the sayings aloud, "You must respect women." Turning to the schoolteacher, she said, "You've put up some really good sayings."

"Don't you have electricity?" Nageswararao asked.

"The lines actually run half a kilometre from here. But in our locality we have only kerosene lamps," the teacher laughed.

"Can't we at least get petromax lamps?"

"I've tried, Saar, but couldn't get them. Of the two lanterns, one is

from my house. The other is from the adult education centre of Harijanawada. During the elections you have to put up with inconveniences like these ... Now wash your faces. There, outside the room, I've put a bucket and a small vessel. Food will be ready in an hour. I've also cooked chicken. You are a nonvegetarian, aren't you?"

"Vegetarian," Nageswararao said.

"Don't mind my asking. Are you a brahmin, Saar?" asked Pankajam.

"No, but at home we are all vegetarians. We don't even eat eggs. All our relatives too are vegetarians. I don't have any objections if you eat."

"I'm not that particular," Pankajam said.

"We are used to it," I said.

"Well, I've also prepared some sambar," the schoolteacher said before leaving with the children. Pankajam removed her cap and put it aside. She took out a cake of soap, left the room to wash her face and returned soon after. Nageswararao and I walked towards the borewell. By the time we returned, Pankajam was neatly dressed in a sari. She was combing her hair. She tied her hair into a ponytail. I noticed Nageswararao looking at Pankajam with unblinking eyes.

While eating, Pankajam bit into a piece of chicken and egged Nageswararao on, "When we are giving up our brahminism, which can't feed us, why are you entering the fray calling yourselves kamma brahmins, reddy brahmins, et cetera?"

Surprised, Nageswararao asked, "You are a brahmin ... Pankajam?"

"Yes, most definitely, we're Vaikhanasas. We belong to the Bharadwaja gotram. What did you think our family name was? Senadhipatyam! Now, I may be in the Homeguard army with a daily wage of fifteen rupees, but that's a different matter," said Pankajam, with a laugh.

I couldn't remember such lively mealtimes in my own house and enjoyed my meal heartily.

"Why don't you sleep in my house and come back tomorrow

morning, sister?" the schoolteacher proposed after we had finished .

"It's no problem, Saar. This is not a forest. These two are here to keep me company," she replied.

I was impressed with the way Pankajam took everything so calmly. I noticed that Nageswararao was quite charmed by Pankajam. The teacher and two others who came with him picked up the empty dishes and left. Nageswararao lay down on the two benches. A couple of minutes later, looking up, he said, "I can't sleep if there's light."

I put out the lantern near him and turned down the flame considerably in the other, placing it in a corner on Pankajam's side. I lay down between them in the dim light. Pankajam lay down in her corner.

I couldn't fall asleep immediately. Neither could I see anything through the window. The strains of a verse sung in a loud female voice, accompanied by a single-stringed instrument, floated in.

> What did you find attractive in me
> You wondered what my body was like, My Lord
> Only desire no substance
> My face in your eyes
> Was only a beautiful lump of flesh ...

The singer stretched and sang the verse over and over again. In my childhood, I had heard Siddamma sing that verse many times. The singer stopped for a while and then took up a new couplet.

> Born, you took that path again
> Having come, you desired it.

Was this a dislike for the body? Was it a desire for liberation? Was it a shield to protect one from the problems of life? What were Nageswararao's feelings as he listened to this song? What would my

daughters say if they heard it? Whatever it was, perhaps this was not the way to perceive life! The song ended. In between, we could hear the teetuvu.

I don't know when I fell asleep. I woke up with a jolt on hearing a sound. I got up. It was dark, I couldn't see anything. The lantern in the corner flickered weakly and then died out. In the darkness, I could hear Pankajam's voice clearly, "What is it, PO Saar? Can't sleep? For heaven's sake, did you think I was your wife?"

"Please, Pankajam! Softly …" I heard Nageswararao whisper.

I sat up and turned on the torch I had kept near my pillow. Nageswararao was standing at Pankajam's feet.

"What is it, Saar? Do you want to go out?" I asked.

"U … um … new place … couldn't sleep … I thought of going out for a smoke … It's dark … I can't find the door …" Nageswararao answered confusedly.

I could see that he was lying. There was a door right next to him on the very side he had been sleeping. One who smokes would always have a matchbox. I looked at Pankajam. She had calmly turned over and gone back to sleep. In the glare of the torchlight Nageswararao stumbled towards his bed and lit the lantern near it. He turned up the flame, opened the door, went out and stood there for five minutes.

In the meanwhile, I called out to Pankajam. She was sleeping soundly. Nageswararao came in. He turned down the lantern and went to bed. I too went back to sleep.

Once more my sleep was disturbed, this time by the sound of the borewell being pumped. When I opened my burning eyes, I couldn't see anything. I thought the lantern light had died down. I flashed the torch on my watch and saw the time. It was ten past five. That meant it was early morning. When I turned on the torch, I couldn't see Nageswararao on the benches. Pankajam was not on the floor. Both the doors were ajar. I approached the one closer to me.

I could hear Pankajam's voice.

"Saar … PO Saar! Don't come here, I'm taking a bath. There's no danger to my chastity … but it is a matter of civility. Wait for five minutes. Don't come here. Leave the lantern inside."

I called out, "Saar."

Nageswararao came back hastily with the lantern and tried to give a quick explanation, "Have you got up? I'm glad. My stomach doesn't feel so good."

"Let's go this way. I'll get water in a bucket later."

I took Nageswararao a little farther away, to the open space behind the school. I put down the lantern farther and stood at a discreet distance. Nageswararao walked around for about ten to fifteen minutes and then came back.

"Now I feel better," Nageswararao said, trying to cover up his crooked intentions.

"Then, let's get ready," I said.

Nageswararao walked silently behind me. By the time we came into the schoolroom, Pankajam was in her Homeguard's uniform. She was tying the laces on her boots.

As if nothing had happened, Pankajam said, "Won't you get ready, Saar?"

Our work for the election day began.

We started polling at eight o'clock. One of the polling officers was the schoolteacher. The other was a woman from the next village. Besides the two polling officers there were two agents. We had no problems. Polling was dull. Pankajam worked hard to send in the voters in an orderly manner. She wasn't impatient and worked skilfully, laughing and making others laugh. Initially, Nageswararao demurred. He showed his authority. The two polling officers and I looked after everything.

It was four fifty in the evening. Seventy per cent of the votes had been cast.

"Let's pack up. We have to complete filling all the forms. There's a lot of procedure to follow," Nageswararao said.

"We'll wait for these ten minutes, Saar," I said.

"Who else will come? You're just being stubborn," he grumbled.

When there were still four or five minutes left, Pankajam came in and said, "Saar, there are still thirty people left. Fifteen people are outside. The others are about fifteen yards away and are on their way here."

"We can't do anything," he said, observing that the agents had left.

"There are still three minutes left, Saar. They go out for coolie work. They don't have spare time like us. Give them the papers and continue the polling after five, Saar," said Pankajam.

"Considering the booth, that seems the right thing to do," I said. The polling officers supported me.

Our Presiding Officer grumbled but agreed. I thought there wouldn't be such objections at a polling station where there were farmers. Polling was over by six o'clock. By seven, the sealing of the ballot boxes, the completion of the forms, the packing, et cetera, were all over. The schoolteacher was with us. The woman polling officer had left. Thinking that we would get late, the schoolteacher went and made arrangements for rice, chutney and buttermilk for us.

Nageswararao said he didn't want to eat, so the two of us sat down to our meal.

Suddenly Nageswararao roared, "We hear rapes take place in polling stations. Why then do they post women police?"

I was stunned by his question.

Pankajam got up in the middle of her meal and said in a loud voice, "Your dialogue may have sounded good in a Telugu movie, Saar, but I find it distasteful. How are you able to eat with the same mouth with which you utter those words?"

Nageswararao was not offended. How pleased he was! He had been able to utter such words in front of a female Homeguard. I

wondered whether this great man, this man in authority, would have had the guts to utter one word in front of a male police officer.

The lorry came around eleven that night. We reached our allotted district in the early hours. When the work was over, our Presiding Officer vanished without even saying goodbye.

When Pankajam came to say goodbye there were tears in my eyes.

"Why have you taken up this job?" I asked.

"Do you think a person who failed in her tenth class could get any other, Saar? There are four people who depend on me. I don't have a father. There's always some reason somewhere, especially for women who are looked upon with disdain."

"That PO, the scoundrel …" I couldn't complete my sentence.

"That's one kind of a street dog. If you threaten it, it'll run away," she burst out laughing. "But you're wondering what I'd do if mad dogs follow me, right?"

I laughed uncomfortably.

"So long as men's culture only allows them to look at a woman's body, its curves and its beauty, the problems will be as bad for me as for your daughters or anyone else, won't they, Saar? Tell me, what would you do if you were me?"

I shivered.

Pankajam laughed.

Bidding me goodbye, she surged ahead walking along the flowers strewn by the ramabanam tree, amidst rays of light which could not completely pierce the darkness.

I realized, at that moment, how weak my wings, supposed to be protecting my daughters all these days, in fact were.

"Rekkalu" was first published in *India Today*, 6-20 January 1991. This version has been translated from *Kethu Viswanathareddy Kathalu*, Hyderabad Visalandhra Publishing House, 1994 (1991).

Kavanasarma

Surpanakha's Sorrow

Ramaraju was fuming. He was fretting, spitting fire, letting out steam. He decided that he had to take revenge for the insult he had suffered.

He felt humiliated because Ravanarao had deceived him and carried Sita away. He was not worried because his wife was suffering at the hands of his enemy but because he felt that people might laugh at him for being so effeminate and doing nothing while his enemy had a good time with his wife. Ravanarao should pay. Only then would he have peace of mind. Only then would his manliness have any value.

Ramaraju was so worked up that he took Latchumaiah and went looking around the neighbourhood. When he went a little southward he saw a flower garden.

"This is Ravanarao's sister's garden, Anna," said Latchumaiah.

"I know," said Ramaraju imperiously, "So what do you want me to do?"

"Did I say anything, Anna? I only reminded you."

"Do *you* have to remind me that this Surpanakha is that Ravanasura's sister?" Ramaraju said, irritatedly.

When Ramaraju was in college, the other students had named Ravanarao's sister Surpanakha because she was of a jealous and mean nature and because she was Ravanarao's sister. She had once nurtured a lot of affection for Ramaraju but Ravanarao had found her a good match. Later her husband left her and took up with another woman and she started looking after this garden where she lived happily selling flowers and fruits. She used to come to their parnasala and speak to Sita. But of late she had stopped that.

"That girl is a bit jealous because you take good care of me," Sita had once laughingly told Ramaraju. Though she had dismissed the whole thing with a smile, she hadn't stopped meeting Surpanakha. Nor had she turned her away.

Sita would look out anxiously for Ramaraju if he went out anywhere. That day when he and Latchumaiah came home, Sita was not waiting at the doorstep looking out for him. Ramaraju remembered that day vividly.

"Sita," he called out. There was no reply.

"Sita!" he shouted. Sita didn't answer, What is it?

"Sita!" he screamed as if the roof would come down. Still Sita did not come running.

Sita never went to the town, not even to see a film. Thinking she might have left a note, he searched all over the house but found nothing.

Then Ramaraju remembered that he had appointed Sita to serve Dasakanthaswami. He walked towards a hut in the corner of the garden. No sign of movement there. He went in and looked around. The prayer things had not been disturbed. There was a smell in the room, the kind of odour found in hospitals. He thought perhaps someone had been injured.

He came out and called, "Latchumaiah!"

"Coming, Anna."

Latchumaiah walked towards him.

"Where's Amma, you rascal?"

"I don't know. I was with you, wasn't I?"

"Why did you come with me without my asking you to come, you wretched rascal?"

"You didn't ask me but Amma told me, Go and see. Our car seems to have broken down at some distance. You may have to push it. Or do something else. Go and check. This is a forest. If our car isn't there, come running back. If it's our car, take this bag, tell him to go to town and get me the grocery I want. When I reached, weren't you under the car? I pushed the car and it started with a whirr. Thinking I may have to push it again on the way, I quickly got into the car."

"Where's Swamiji?"

"I don't know!"

All was quiet for a while.

"Perhaps Swamiji has taken Amma along with him to the Siva temple," said Latchumaiah after sometime.

"It's good you didn't say he eloped with her, you wretched fellow," Ramaraju snapped.

But the seed of suspicion was sown in his mind. In a little while it grew into a huge banyan tree. Wondering, What could that odour be that I smelt in the hut? he went in again. He inhaled and realized that it was chloroform.

"So you're a fake swami, you scoundrel! You threw a blanket over my eyes, didn't you? You deceitful scoundrel! You've kidnapped my wife, haven't you, you bastard!" Ramaraju hissed.

He searched for Sita and the swami. He found a jutka driver who was on the verge of death. He said, "Saar, the car sped past me like a rocket. Amma was bundled in at the back. I tried to avoid the car, fell into the pit and was seriously injured."

Ramaraju understood what had happened. He knew now that this was Ravanarao's handiwork.

Ravanarao and Ramaraju were bitter business rivals. Ravanarao's people had lived in that town all along while Ramaraju's father had come from another district and settled there. Ramaraju wanted to enter Ravanarao's family business, which had been with him for generations, and establish his authority. And Ravanarao was infuriated by this.

Ravanarao placed his most trusted people in Ramaraju's service, got copies of documents of his business transactions and gave them to the income tax authorities. Ramaraju entrusted his entire business to his half-brother and stayed away from it. That brother's uncle wielded a lot of influence. He was trying to throw money around and get the cases dropped.

Two years ago, Ramaraju had bought a garden at some distance from the town thinking it might come in useful. He had given up his business for a while and was trying to wash away the sins of his past and earn a good name. So he built a house, with all amenities, in that garden, called it a parnasala and lived there with Sita. He took Latchumaiah along to keep him company.

Trying to prove that he had no desire for money, he started wearing clothes made of coir. He kept good company so that people would call him an honourable person. Thinking, who better than swamijis – agents of Gods – to give him a clean chit, he turned to them!

It was around this time that he learnt of Dasakanthaswami. He was told that when the swami prayed to Lord Siva, his voice had the power of ten voices, and that he could sing in the voices of Ghantasala, Balasubramaniam, Raja, Madhavapeddi, Pithapuram, MS Ramarao, PB Srinivas, Raghuramiah, Suribabu and Rajeswararao. He requested

the swamiji to come to his parnasala, stay for a week and accept alms from him. The swami agreed.

What Ramaraju did not know was that the swami was none other than Ravánarao in disguise.

Ravanarao's wife was aware of his intentions. "You should fight amongst yourselves and decide who is the stronger of the two. But it is not right on your part to kidnap Sita. Would you be able to tolerate it if Ramaraju kidnapped me?" she asked, trying to make him see reason.

"Shut up! I am not a fool like him. I have not built a hut away from the city and am not living with you there. There are ten people, along with five hounds, guarding you! It's not possible for Ramaraju even to look at you from up close," Ravanarao said, proudly twirling his moustache.

Dasakanthaswami had a hut built close to the parnasala in Ramaraju's garden and lived there. He kidnapped Sita at the first opportunity, drugging her with chloroform and carrying her off. Though he had a house as large as Lanka, he hid Sita elsewhere, so that even if Ramaraju came with a search warrant, he would have to go back empty handed. "What can this Ramaraju do? He doesn't have any proof against me," he boasted.

Ravanarao had forgotten about Surpanakha.

But that day Ramaraju remembered Surpanakha was Ravanarao's sister.

The next day, Ramaraju went as if to visit her and invited her over. "Why don't you come and see our garden? It seems you have stopped coming over because Sita is no longer around." Surpanakha immediately understood that he was really saying Sita is not here and I'm alone. When she was in the first year of the Intermediate class, she had cast her vote for Ramaraju who was in the final year of BA, and had helped him win the election as President of the Union. Those

days she used to love him deeply. Knowing that they didn't belong to the same caste, however, she had had no illusions of marrying him. She remembered those times.

She dressed up in her best clothes and went to Ramaraju's garden the next day. Eager to be kissed by Ramaraju she went straight to him.

He smiled maliciously and said, "Latchumaiah! Get that knife you had sharpened this morning and cut off this bitch's nose and ears."

"What kind of love play is this?" Surpanakha asked, thinking it was all a joke.

"I'm coming, Anna," said Latchumaiah, drawing a knife.

Ramaraju bolted the doors so that Surpanakha could not escape. An atrocity was committed on Surpanakha in that very garden in broad daylight.

"May you be ruined! May your wife be a widow! What did I do to you, you cunning bastard! May you drop dead!" cursed Surpanakha.

"Your brother has brought me disgrace by carrying my wife away. I've taught your brother a lesson by cutting off your nose and ears. Go! Go and tell your brother! Go and tell your woes to your brother. Tell him that this is just the beginning, not the end. That the worst is yet to come," said Ramaraju and then ordered Latchumaiah, "Go, push her out into the street." His follower obeyed the order.

Surpanakha went to Ravanarao's house. He shouted angrily with his ten voices, called the doctors, had her wounds dressed, took a certificate and filed a police case. The police imprisoned Ramaraju. Ramaraju's brother bribed the authorities, got someone to put in a word and had him released. The brother also engaged a lawyer for defending the case in court.

The lawyer argued, "This girl has a history of biting ears and having her ears bitten ever since childhood. It is because of this

habit, that she has had her ears bitten off after she left Ramaraju's place. As the people who bit her ears had long teeth, her ears got torn. What's there in the certificate presented by Ravanarao in the court? That her ears were torn. It doesn't say that Ramaraju had them cut. There's no evidence. As for the nose, this girl has had an English education. She was in the habit of poking her nose into things. Because she poked her nose in the wrong place, it was cut. There is no proof that my client had anything to do with it. Blood on Latchumaiah's knife is only circumstantial evidence. Many hens are killed in the house of the Rajus. It hasn't been proven that the blood on the knife and Surpanakha's blood type were one and the same."

The court dismissed the case as there were no eyewitnesses.

Outside the court, Surpanakha, with her deformed face, said, "Why should we become victims of the rivalry between men, the male scoundrels? If my brother kidnaps Ramaraju's wife, Ramaraju should go straight to my brother and cut off his nose and ears, shouldn't he? Because he lacked the courage to do that, he targeted me. Look, how manly my brother is! Because he couldn't compete in business with Ramaraju, he kidnapped his wife. So much for his valour. This is a country of courageous men! When Harijans revolt, unable to face them, these heroic men invade their homes when they are not around, and the brave policemen who go ostensibly to protect the weak, violate their women. When the police come and arrest the rogues, the rest of the rogues come, and instead of doing anything either to the men who had tipped off the police or to the police themselves, they rape the women of the town. Whoever wants to settle an account with the other, targets only the women. We become the scapegoats of their

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Biting ears: This Telugu expression has two meanings, a) the literal one of biting or having one's ears bitten and b) gossiping about others and listening to gossip, often used as a pun.

vengeance. Why don't you settle your own accounts, you rascals? May you all be ruined! Oh God, can you not help us conceive without men, and even when we have children, can you not make sure that we don't give birth to male worms? Or are you yourself male?"

Surpanakha was inconsolable.

"That's how it is, our life as women," sympathized her sister-in-law, Ravanarao's wife.

"Surpanakha Sokam" was first published in *Andhra Sachitra Vara Patrika*, 11 May 1984. This version has been translated from *Kavanasarma Kathalu*, R K Publications, Visakhapatnam, 1995.

Ranganayakamma

Money

A crore!

A crore!!

What's a crore?

Money! Wealth! Rupees!

A crore of rupees!

Apparently that highly educated young man has asked for a dowry!

A crore of rupees as dowry! Isn't that surprising?

What's there to be so surprised? There'll always be people who ask for dowry as long as there are those who give it. Not one, they could ask for two crores. They could ask for four. Or a hundred crores! What's the limit on money? Is there any limit on numbers? Why won't people demand when there are people willing to give? That is not so surprising.

Then what *is* it that is surprising?

That the father of the bride promised to give that much dowry – that is surprising! That even a dowry of rupees one crore has become not so surprising, is surprising. That *is* surprising.

What's so surprising about even that? How many crores worth of property would a person who is willing to give a dowry of a crore have?

He must have either tens of crores or hundreds of crores. What's so surprising, then, about his parting with one? That's no surprise either.

But what is the real surprise then? It is the young woman who surprises us. She too is as educated as him. It is really surprising that a woman has agreed to live with a man who says, "I'll agree to live with you only if you give me so much money."

Even a "Well educated" man has demanded a dowry!

Even a "Well educated" woman has agreed to it!

If we set aside his and her education, he and she will remain.

He, a man! And she, a woman!

Men ask for dowries and gifts, women oblige them. That the same truism is applicable here too, is surprising! That there's nothing more to education than the physical weight of books is surprising!

"Should I take a dowry or should I ask for a share in my maama's property?" the son-in-law debated with a number of gentlemen.

"Take whatever is more," said the intelligent ones. That's right, isn't it?

"Which one is more?" the son-in-law asked his maama.

"Share in the property is ten rupees more. But ..." said the maama.

"But what? Why don't you tell me?"

"Giving dowry is our custom."

"Should I lose the ten rupees for the sake of custom?"

An intelligent gentleman, sensing the danger the son-in-law would fall prey to if he were too keen on the ten rupees, warned him, "If you are looking for a share in the property, you should know that all that would be only in your wife's name. If it's dowry, it will come to you," he explained, revealing all his wisdom.

"When my wife herself is under my control, why won't her property be?" though surprised, the son-in-law asked an intelligent question.

"We can't say. Times are changing!"

"Are they? Are times changing so much? Are they changing in

such a way that even when my wife is under my control, her property is not?"

"So much so that even your wife will not be under your control."

"Is that so? Then, what should I do?" the son-in-law was worried.

"It doesn't matter if it's ten rupees less. Opt for the dowry. Don't go in for a share in the property. It's not good for a man."

The son-in-law liked this wise suggestion. But to suffer the loss of ten rupees – *that* was his problem.

This time, he wanted to depend on his own wisdom. After deep contemplation, he announced, "I'm not going to forego even those ten rupees."

"What'll you do? How will you manage it?" the intelligent gentleman asked with a stupid look.

"Just see what I'll do! You better add the ten rupees to that one crore and give me. Otherwise ..."

"What'll you do otherwise?" asked the maama.

"You won't have any choice but to look for another match for your daughter."

"No, no. Don't say such a thing. Don't disgrace me in the eyes of others," pleaded the maama and agreed to all his conditions.

The match was finalized.

"I want to see all the money in hard cash. How wonderful it would be to look at!"

"Have you ever seen a pile of a crore of rupees?" asked the maama.

"No. I have never seen such a pile. But why did you say A crore? Isn't it a crore and ten rupees? You cannot go back on your word, okay?"

"There's no question of going back on my word. I won't be happy to deposit all the money in the bank and give you a cheque. Neither will you have the pleasure of receiving it with your own hands that way. I'll give you all the money in cash."

"That's right. Then, I don't have to account to the income tax fellows either."

"Yes. That's the advantage. You have to think of what's advantageous at every step. Moreover, I like to look at the money in sacks. For many years I have been piling up ten paisa coins. It's one of my pleasures. Ten paisa coins worth a crore! So many sacks of money! I've filled a whole shed with them, so much that two eyes are not enough to look at them."

"Will you show them to me? How wonderful a sight it will be!'

"All those bags are for you. Your dowry."

"So many of them? Have they been counted properly?"

"Yes. The men who work for us have counted and packed them."

"Have they been counted by the servants? We can't trust them. Moreover, they don't know how to count."

"It's all right. I'll give you an extra sack. We'll weigh it in front of you."

"No, no. There is always a lot of cheating in weighing ... I'll count them myself."

"Count them yourself?"

"Yes, I'll do it that way. Shall I start right away? Will I finish in two days?"

"Not now. Start counting after the marriage."

"But what if I find the amount less after the marriage?"

"I'll give you twice the difference. Is that all right?"

"All right. All right. Give me the key to the shed right now. I'll keep it with me.

"It's with my daughter."

"She might lose it while dressing up for the wedding. Give it to me right now."

"All right. As you please. It's the key to the shed that contains a crore of rupees. Careful!"

"Why did you say A crore? Isn't it a crore and ten rupees?"

"That's what I meant. A crore and ten rupees. Not just that. I'll give you an extra sack."

As soon as he got off the wooden plank on which he'd been sitting for the marriage ceremony, the bridegroom, still in his wedding clothes, rushed to the shed and started counting the money. Except for the coins, the whole world disappeared from his sight the moment he got there. Sunrises, moonrises, full moons, new moons, seasons, the very idea of time, in short, all nature vanished.

The wheels of time kept moving!

Twenty four years had passed by the time he finished counting the coins in the last sack. He was seething with anger when he finished counting. "It's forty paise less! How deceitful! He said he had given me an extra sack. Cheating fraud! I'll teach him a lesson. I'll make him touch my feet and apologize," jumping up and down, he turned around.

Two women were standing there looking at him in wonder. One of them appeared to be a little over forty five. The other resembled her. She looked like her daughter.

The counting wizard of a bridegroom looked, perplexed, at the older woman, his memory of her rather hazy.

"I ... marriage ... Aren't you the same person?"

"Yes."

"If so, I don't choose to live with you."

"Is that so? Why?"

"Call your nanna. I'll tell him why. How can he cheat me like this?"

"How did he cheat you?"

"He gave me forty paise less."

"There may have been some minor error in counting."

"No. The servants must have pocketed them."

"No. If they had wanted to, they would have taken much more. It must have been an error in counting."

"Who is going to suffer now for that error? Call your nanna. Ask him to come quickly!"

"It's five years since he died."

"Died? How could he die without telling me?"

"A lot of things have taken place without your knowledge. Minutes after the wedding, you were engrossed in counting the money. For two years I kept coming here to see you, to try to stop you from counting. Whenever I came to speak to you, you stopped me with angry gestures of your hand to suggest, Don't interrupt. Don't. I will lose count. Sometimes you actually lost count and ran back to the first sack. You knocked down the sacks you had already counted. Oh, the many times you had done that! I realized my mistake soon enough. I lost all interest in you when I understood your nature. I came to the conclusion that it was better to die than live with you. Fortunately for me, a man whom I still consider my treasure, came into my life. My father didn't initially agree to my marrying him but eventually, he acquiesced. Our marriage took place without a word about money. I came again to tell you about it that day. Seeing me approach, you stopped me from coming close, saw red and said to me, "Don't come. Don't. I have to count carefully. Don't interrupt."

"Two years later this girl was born. At least then I wanted to tell you, and came to you again. Count ... don't interrupt. Don't, you gesticulated frantically, visibly disturbed. So I waited, to tell you after you had finished counting. Twenty four years have passed."

"Twenty four years?"

"Yes. Twenty four years! One third of a man's life! Most of those who were alive on our wedding day are now dead. Five governments have changed in our state. My daughter has completed her college education. My parents incurred heavy losses in business and lost their

entire property. My father died of distress. My husband and I have been happy all along as we have had no interest in property. We have both been supporting ourselves by working. If my life had not taken this turn, but had been tied to yours, my eyes would still have been closed. I would have been thinking of giving all this money to our daughter as dowry. But today I can't even stand that word. It is as intolerable to me as Sati, Imprisonment and Noose. I have told this girl our story. She came because she was curious to see the man who has been counting money for twenty four years. If my nanna had not given you this money, not just my nanna, if no one had given you a dowry, you would have led a normal life. You don't seem to understand how you have lost the capacity to lead a normal life. I don't know how long I have been waiting to say these things to you. How many times have I tried to pull you out of this danger! But the moment you saw me, you used to be worried about losing count. That you have lost direction in life has never bothered you. Doesn't matter. At least now you've finished counting. I am happy that at least now I have been able to tell you everything I wanted to."

"Hm! Happiness! Who is happy! It's forty paise less. Your nanna said he would give twice the amount by which it is less. All lies. Who will give me the eighty paise now?"

Both the women turned to leave.

"Fool," said the daughter.

"I too should take half the blame for what happened then. I can't understand how I had agreed to live with a person who demanded money from me to live with him. I was only happy to know that my parents were giving so much dowry for my sake. I couldn't see beyond that."

"You have realized your mistake, haven't you? He too can realize his mistake, but why would he? For he wasn't the one who gave the money, but the one who received it."

"That's why he received his punishment. He has lost a lifetime."

"As Nanna said, the fault lies in so much money getting accumulated with one person. How did Tatayya get so much money? You say that one shouldn't agree to live with a person who demands dowry. In fact, one shouldn't live with a person who has property. When there's property, won't there be maintenance of its accounts? Nanna was right, the entire problem lies with property alone."

"What's the connection between dowry and property?"

"Isn't it obvious? If parents have some property, aren't they supposed to give their daughters a share? But they don't. Why they don't is an entirely different matter. They don't give it, do they? Instead of giving an equal share in their property they give some part of it as dowry. The problem of dowry *is* the division of property. Nothing else."

"What if parents don't have any property?"

"We'll come to the question of not having any property later. Consider what happens when they have property. Because people, even when they have property, give it in the form of Dowry, it has become a custom. What's more, it appears as if there's no link between property and dowry. Those having no property too follow the same custom as those who do. It has nothing to do with whether one has property or not. Dowry has become a practice with everyone."

"Many more such practices will arise if women have no sense like me."

"Having sense makes no difference. If girls stop giving dowries, calculations concerning their property will begin. Aren't the girl's people finding out how much property the boy's people have? Aren't they fixing marriages on that basis? This is also like that. All the bargaining for dowry will turn into calculations about property. Only a propertied girl will be able to marry. A girl without property won't. Therefore, what looks like a dowry problem is nothing but a property problem."

Her mother tossed her head, "What else is there in the lives of propertied people but monetary transactions? If they don't count it in terms of ten paisa coins they count it in terms of ten rupee notes or hundred rupee notes. If they don't spend twenty four years they will spend all the twenty four hours counting their money. Isn't that the difference? Will the greed for money cease if each human being gets a share in the property? As for myself, I can't love a propertied man, leave aside a man who asks for dowry."

"Dabbu" was first published in *Andhra Jyoti,* 2 June 1989. This version has been translated from *Amma ki Aadivaram Leda?*, Sweet Home Publications, Hyderabad, 1998 (1996).

P Sathyavathi

Incentive

Viriboni sounds great on the veena. Though Sarada had learnt a lot of kritis, she had a special love for Viriboni. She didn't know why, but she knew that she liked it very much. That day, while cleaning the house, and wiping her veena, she felt an urge to play Viriboni on it once again. She remembered her veena teacher. "If you practise, you'll become as great as Dhanammal!" he used to say. But where was the time to practise? By the time she had tightened the strings, adjusted the shruti and was about to begin the varnam, the bell rang. She put aside the veena and opened the door.

"What's all this? Why is the house in such a mess? Didn't I tell you I'll be back by four? I've asked my colleague Sivarao to come at five. He said he would come with his wife. Why did you take the veena out now? My God! Did you make anything for them to eat?" her husband said.

Sarada put the veena back in the box. The Viriboni varnam lingered in her mind. Now she had to welcome Sivarao and his wife and had to set the house in order before they came. If the house wasn't neat, Rao would be angry. It seemed that everyone who worked for a foreign company had to have the same kind of lifestyle.

Their culture too, was different. She covered the veena box and placed a flowerpot on it.

Sivarao and his wife arrived.

They stayed on till midnight.

The next morning, before the children left for school and Rao for office, the breakfast table had to be laid out, as elegantly decorated as on a film set. Everything had to move like clockwork.

Rao left town now and then on official work. Though Sarada was able to breathe a little easier during his absence, the children would invariably have unit tests or something else just then. So Sarada simply never got the chance to take out the veena and play Viriboni.

That afternoon Rao was out attending a camp. Sarada's younger daughter had been pestering her for notebooks and the elder one for socks. She set off to the market to buy these as well as the grocery. She had the car only when Rao was in town. It was not there otherwise.

Ten yards away from her flat was a moduga tree with a teastall under it. Four or five rickshaws always stood there. On days when Rao was late, Sarada used to sit by her window looking out at the teastall. From her window, Sarada would watch Venkatesu, who served tea to the customers, work till twelve in the night. The place bustled with activity till the late night show was over.

Narayana, who ran the teastall, was fond of her daughters so he made it a point to speak to Sarada.

"How are you, Amma? What brings you here?" asked Narayana.

"I want to go shopping. So, how are you? Your business seems to be flourishing. It's always busy here," said Sarada.

"Yes. It is busy. Isn't it centrally located?"

"That means you must be earning a lot," Sarada said, congratulating him.

"How, Amma? I'm just a worker. On a monthly salary. The owner is our Ramulu babai," Narayana sighed.

"So this stall is not yours! But then why are you here?"

"Where else can I be? It's the same wherever I work. At least, there are some facilities here."

Venkatesu was working mechanically, dipping the dirty cups into a tub of water, washing them clean, filling them with tea, putting them on a tray and going around.

"Narayana, if you bought this stall wouldn't you have had all this money?" she asked.

Narayana looked at Sarada with pity – like a person who has attained ultimate knowledge looking at an ignoramus – and laughingly said, "How can I buy it, Amma? What's my salary? Not even one tenth of the earnings per month from this stall. It won't be enough even for my family. If I have to buy a stall in a central place like this, I have to pay for the goodwill. Moreover, why would Ramulu babai sell the stall? Amma, who would want to sell the golden goose?"

In the meanwhile the children had called a rickshaw puller and fixed a price. Sarada got onto the rickshaw feeling sorry for Narayana.

It was eight thirty when they returned home from shopping. Rao was waiting for them.

He looked a bit annoyed.

Sarada realized that the job for which he had gone out of town had not been successful. Moreover, coming home to a locked house always angered him.

"It's bad, very bad, they keep nagging us. Don't the buyers know the defects of the product? When we ask them to rectify the defect, they ask us why they should employ us."

He then abused the higher authorities and the dealers nonstop for a quarter of an hour and then went in to bathe.

Rao didn't speak much to his wife and children. And when he deigned to, he spoke only about his office. Apart from his job, he had no personal matters to talk about. His colleagues, his office, his

Regional Manager, Vice President, their dealer here, their dealer there, their questions, his intelligent replies, his experience, his intelligence, their abusing him for not reaching the targets, his rejoinders, his company, its greatness, its turnover in crores, the many facilities for the employees – Sarada knew all these by heart.

If she made chapattis for breakfast, he would start off, "None of my colleagues eat chapattis early in the morning. Only idlis, or bread, butter and jam. You and your village upbringing. Go and watch the wives of my colleagues and the kind of things they cook."

His company was heaven, and those who worked in it, gods. Yet all of them were slaves to the bosses of the heaven, the Marketing Manager, the Vice President and the General Manager. They are enjoying their slavery. It's like that, Sarada used to think at first.

But Rao had changed her mind.

"When the company provides us with so many facilities, it's not slavery. We are like a family. We work earnestly. That means, we care for the company's wellbeing."

Sarada appreciated her husband's devotion to his deity. Her husband was a great man. A sincere worker. Hence his promotion and the car. So many perks. This house has everything because of his hard work. The children are getting a good schooling. We have enough to eat and squander. Three cheers to the company! Three cheers to my husband! said Sarada to herself.

She was now the wife of an employee of the company. If she looked after his comforts and provided him with all that he wanted on time, he would be able to work efficiently. Then he would get promotion. It would enhance his status. Increase his salary. The children would be well educated. Their prestige would go up in society. Therefore, just as Rao worked with sincerity and devotion for the company, so Mrs Rao worked for Rao – with a lot of regard, with implicit obedience – and found her life's fulfilment in it.

On a particular day Sarada felt like playing the Viriboni. On another day she felt like taking her children out. Sometimes she wanted to visit her friend, Sakuntala. But she could never do any of these things. On one occasion Rao's friends came home. On another, it was his immediate boss who had come for dinner. Yet another time, it was his Regional Manager who was in town to launch a new sales campaign.

After attending the annual sales conference, Rao would come home and talk about it over the meal, "It was tense at the conference this time. Nobody had the guts to say anything. Our Vice President scolded each one of us, just as you scold the maidservant, rubbing in the fact that you had given her an old sari, ice cream and money for the cinema. That's how it is! That they have given us bonus, rent-free quarters, a car, medical benefits, Actuals. And in spite of all these, we have not met the targets. Maybe, they feel, we have too many comforts. Somehow I picked up the courage to say, Improve the product. Give incentives. Advertise on the television like everybody, et cetera. The Vice President jumped up like a monkey on hot coals.

"If we keep doing all those things, why should we spend so much on you every year? Why do we need so many marketing staff? Is this a soap or sambar powder? To change the formula once we have to spend crores of rupees. And if we should advertise on television, why should we give you Travelling Allowances? he screamed at us. That's the way they think ..." And so Rao would rant on. No one cared to listen to him when he carried on in this manner. But one had to. He was the lord of the house. One was meant to listen carefully to one's master.

Sarada would listen to him. She now knew all about the company. Having spent fifteen years listening to his spiel she now felt a bit annoyed. She sensed an emptiness in her thoughts and deeds, for she

felt she had lost herself somewhere. She felt compelled to search for and recover her self. This realization first dawned when Ragini and her family moved into the apartment next door with their two children. Ragini's husband had not completely drowned himself in the company culture. One day, when she went to their house, they were discussing a movie. Another time it was politics, and on yet another it was literature and music. That is when Sarada's impatience started. The day it began she took her veena out of its case, played it, and taught her elder daughter sa, ri, ga, ma. That same day she had an argument with Rao.

Rao had gone to attend the annual conference once again. Whenever he went out of station his suitcase was always packed by his wife. All missing buttons were dutifully stitched on to his shirts. He made her put powder in the folds of his kerchiefs and then fold them. He made her pack his ties, shoes and slippers separately. He was accustomed to this for the last fifteen years. When he checked into a hotel room and opened his suitcase, he found his clothes arranged in the order he was to use them. All his colleagues were envious of the way his suitcase was packed.

Sarada finished her work and sat by the window. The children had finished their lessons and gone to bed. The business in the teastall was brisk. Narayana was counting money. Venkatesu was moving around. The cash box was filling up. Narayana sat without moving, to ensure that there was no pilferage, busy filling the cash box. Venkatesu worked tirelessly. And Ramulu babai came and took away the day's collection, reflected Sarada as she watched all this.

Venkatesu's task was the most difficult. But what he got was not even a twentieth of the day's collection. Narayana's job too was tough. Moreover, one couldn't fix a price on his honesty. He too did not get even a tenth of the fruits of his labour. What kind of justice was this? she thought.

Sarada was annoyed. Venkatesu was twelve. He deserved a bright future. Yet he was on his feet, tirelessly, from morning till night, contributing to Ramulu babai's wealth. With his honesty, his dedication, his intelligence, Narayana too was helping increase Ramulu babai's wealth. Dissatisfied, Sarada was about to get up and move away from the window. It was almost twelve. Narayana was closing shop. As he was locking up he put a chocolate in Venkatesu's hand, pleased with his hard work. Venkatesu accepted it with the same devotion as he would have accepted prasadam and put it in his mouth. Though this was the last scene she witnessed every day, that day Sarada watched this act of munificence with disgust. She pulled down the curtains, switched off the light and went to bed.

Rao came back from the conference with renewed energy. He had brought things for the kids and spoke enthusiastically to them. He must have received accolades from the powers that be. When he was happy the house joined in, when he was in a foul mood the whole house wore a gloomy silence. "This time the sales of our region were more than anyone else's. We have exceeded the target. The same Vice President, who scolded me the other day, specially praised me this time. You know, I will become a Marketing Manager in August. This time my company has given complimentary gifts to the wives of the employees too. The wives of all the middle management employees were given wristwatches for helping their husbands work efficiently," Rao's enthusiasm was not new to Sarada. She stood there and watched him.

Taking the wristwatch out he said, "The culture of my company is so different. They know that behind every successful man is a woman."

When Sarada looked at the wristwatch she was immediately reminded of the chocolate Narayana tossed into Venkatesu's hand every night. Narayana couldn't go around handing out the tea himself.

There would be no business for him without Venkatesu. Hence the incentive. Yes. And behind every man was a woman. Perhaps behind a woman who had forgotten herself and lost her own self was, not just a man, but a whole system, thought Sarada, for the first time in her married life.

"Tayilam" was first published in *Jyoti: Masa Patrika,* October-November 1989. This version has been translated from *Illalakagane*, Vijayawada, 1995.

Indraganti Janakibala

The Politics of Living

Mohan gazed at his sparkling scooter once again, took out his handkerchief, gently wiped the rearview mirror, wheeled the scooter out, started it and honked twice. It was the twenty fourth of February. Mohan was about to take a ride on his new scooter for the first time.

Tara stopped abruptly just as she was about to step out of the house. She writhed in pain – it was like a sudden tremor of the earth, as if it was torn apart, as if the roof had collapsed in splinters. Her head spun, her legs wobbled. The mild lower abdominal pain which had been nagging her since morning suddenly attained horrific proportions, moved python-like and made her feel as if some Alien was forcing itself out of her womb. The pain made her entire body break out into a sweat, and her clothes became completely wet.

"Amma ..." she cried out and was about to collapse right there but held herself up with the support of the door. Her mother-in-law, who had come to close the door, quickly held her and asked anxiously, "What is it, ammayi? What happened?" Then, immediately realizing what was wrong, she held her tightly and led her inside.

Lying weakly on the hospital bed, Tara was thoughtful. Though she was bleeding, her pain had lessened. The lady doctor had

confirmed that she had had a miscarriage. She took a doctor's certificate to this effect, enclosed a leave letter and sent both to her office. She wrote clearly, asking for the six-week special leave she was entitled to for an abortion.

Tara had been waiting from five in the evening with her eyes riveted on the door wondering when Bharathi would come and give her news of the office. Different thoughts ran through her mind. Had her salary been drawn? She had authorized Bharathi to collect her salary on her behalf and was sure she would come by to give her the money.

Tired, Tara closed her eyes. Varied images danced in front of them, snippets of conversation falling in her ears, Koormarao, Ramanatham, Rangarao in office, their occasional senseless chatter. Remembering their droll, offhand comments, she smiled even in pain.

All the men in the office were quick to crack jokes at and criticize working women. "It would've been so good to be born a woman – we could happily take leave for months together with full pay and rest at home ..." one or the other of them could not refrain from commenting whenever one of the women took maternity leave or special leave for an abortion or a miscarriage.

Tara slipped into a deep slumber. A little after eight, Tara's mother, Vaidehi, brought her dinner on a trolley. The moment she saw her mother, Tara gave vent to her sorrow. Vaidehi held her daughter close and comforted her, saying, "What's there in it? It's nothing to be upset about. Don't feel sad about the loss."

"I have been waiting so anxiously for you," said Tara, her eyes full of tears.

"I received the letter only yesterday. I left in the afternoon," she replied, consoling Tara.

Tara had a Master's in Economics. A gold medallist, she had cleared

the competitive exam. Her father, Rameshbabu, had made sure that she would not be overlooked in the interview. That was how Tara became the goose that laid golden eggs and was able to counter Mohan's mercenary manoeuvres for dowry, pass in his selection of brides, and become his wife.

Bharathi came in saying, "Sorry, Tara. I couldn't come yesterday. My little boy had a slight fever in the morning. When I got a call in the afternoon informing me that his fever had risen further, I left office. Since Mohan had come and taken your salary, I thought it would be all right if I came today."

Tara felt as if a bullet fired from a pistol fitted with a silencer had pierced her heart. That it was inaudible did not mean it hurt any less. She was not upset that Bharathi had not come earlier. But the thought that Mohan, who had taken her salary, had not stopped by the hospital even once that day, filled her heart with immense sadness.

"When are you going home?" asked Bharathi.

"In about an hour's time."

"Okay, then, I have also taken leave for a month."

"So long! What for?"

"My anna has been pestering me for two years to come …"

"Go, have a good time."

"Here's your payslip. Right, then. I'll make a move," Bharathi left.

Tara's heart was filled with a strange fear, and a deep sense of shame.

"What's the matter? Why are you making a fuss over such a small thing? Why? Is it wrong for me to go and pick up your salary? Does it embarrass you?" Mohan was irritated.

"Shouldn't you have informed me at least?"

"Am I not telling you now?"

"Now! After I have asked you! After being taunted so much," she said in disgust.

"It really is a problem if there isn't any understanding between husband and wife," he said.

"I too am saying the same thing."

Mohan didn't respond. She was furious that Mohan, who had brought her mother to the hospital, had dropped her there and left without bothering to come in and was now concocting all kinds of stories.

Vaidehi, who understood the situation, admonished her daughter. "He went away because he had something to do and would be delayed if he came in … What has happened now that you should make such a fuss?" she said, justifying her son-in-law.

Tara started going to the office as soon as her leave ended. She even worked overtime as a lot of work had piled up on her desk.

When she felt a bit heavy and uneasy that day she made some calculations. Realizing that she had not had her periods, she wondered what the reason could be. She told her mother-in-law about it.

"Mm … you lost a lot of blood till the other day, didn't you? It will stop for some time. No need to worry," her mother-in-law reassured her. But when the heaviness persisted even after two weeks, Tara wondered why and went to a gynaecologist. The doctor confirmed that Tara was pregnant and prescribed some medicines. Tara was neither surprised, nor elated. "Would you say it's the third month?" she asked.

"No, my girl, it's pretty advanced, it's more than five months," the doctor said.

"How can that be? I had an abortion three months ago."

"No … that's not correct," the doctor said, and handing over the prescription smiled as if to say she could leave. Sitting behind Mohan on the scooter, Tara quietly conveyed the news to him.

"That's fine, so what's the problem?" said Mohan.

"I guess there's nothing … The one who examined me then was

Dr Lalitha. She was a bit busy preparing to go to America. I tried contacting her twice, but couldn't get across to her," said Tara calmly.

"I don't understand your problem now," said Mohan irritably glancing over his shoulder.

Quick to be annoyed, it was characteristic of Mohan to make his annoyance obvious by raising his voice. Tara composed herself and said, "No problem."

After four days, Tara took Bharathi along to consult the very experienced Dr Mahalakshmi. When they arrived, the doctor was relatively free. As Bharathi knew her personally, she spoke familiarly to them.

She examined Tara, told her she had completed her fifth month and then said twentieth September would be the delivery date. Tara slowly told her all that had happened.

"Oh, is that so? Sometimes such things happen. Implantation, that is, the fertilized egg remains at a place in a corner of the womb. Some women bleed a lot during that time. If we mistake it for post-abortal bleeding, such doubts arise. But then, nothing happens to the foetus, it can grow normally and a child may be born. That's what has happened." Dr Mahalakshmi's dedication and patience was commensurate with her experience, and she explained everything clearly to those who showed a keenness to learn.

Tara attended office till the tenth of September and applied for maternity leave from the eleventh. At that time, she had nothing on her mind other than looking forward to her baby's arrival.

It was the day they were to put the child in a cradle for the first time. The house was bustling with relatives from both sides. The baby had been named Bhagyasri. Mohan was surreptitiously eyeing the clothes given to him by his in-laws, suspicious that they might not match his status.

After the meal, everybody sat around chewing paan and asking

about each other's wellbeing. Just then the postman came and handed a registered letter for Tara. For a moment, there was silence all around. Wondering what the letter from her office contained, Tara's father, Rameshbabu, opened the letter, read it, and was stunned.

It was a show-cause notice asking Tara to explain how she could have taken special leave for six weeks under the pretext of having an abortion six months ago and then taking maternity leave just five months after that. They accused her of cheating the department and producing false certificates.

The festive atmosphere in the house became tense and gloomy. On learning the full facts of all that had transpired, Rameshbabu was very agitated. Mohan was confused. Tara felt as if her mind had gone blank.

Rameshbabu immediately swung into action. He set out, determined to see that his daughter did not lose her job.

Yet, however much he tried to convince the higher officials that it was not a deliberate and premeditated error, they did not believe him.

"When you knew that from the doctor, shouldn't you have informed the department, and converted the special leave to a different kind of leave – that is the minimum responsibility of an employee. For avoiding that responsibility and for trying to cheat the department, removal is inevitable," they said.

Rameshbabu tried to contact Dr Lalitha, who had first examined Tara. He realized that it was stupid to hope that she would admit to her mistake in writing. She had been in a hurry to go abroad. As some officers and section heads had prepared the case very skilfully, they did not yield to any of Rameshbabu's efforts to set things right. The order dismissing her from service duly came.

On that day Mohan came over and lambasted Tara, "You pose like a working woman. But you don't even know the basic rules and regulations. If anything is said against women, your ego comes to the fore."

"I was very disturbed then. Don't you remember?" asked Tara.

"What's the use?" said Mohan sarcastically.

"I was anxious to see Dr Mahalakshmi. But it never occurred to me that I should inform the office also."

"That's exactly what I am asking. Don't you know even that much?"

"Yes. I agree it didn't occur to me. But you could have told me. You knew the rules and regulations well, didn't you?"

"Oh! Don't I have anything else to do? Do I have to tell you about such minor things also?"

"This isn't such a small thing – it's something that has ruined my job!"

"How do I know what you have said in your office? If I ask you anything, it may sound as if I am interfering in your business ..."

"I have been giving you a faithful account of everything that has happened. You could have guided me, couldn't you? Didn't I tell you when there was a discrepancy about the months of my pregnancy?"

"I don't know. How am I to remember? Do you think I have no other business than to remember the time of your periods?"

Tara's anger reached sky high at one shot. Even though she had witnessed and accepted many of her husband's mean qualities by now, she had never imagined he would utter such atrocious words. Her tolerance was nearing its end.

"Yes indeed. How would you remember to keep track of my periods? You only know how to count my salary and pocket it," she said.

Tara got a hard slap. She would have received another, but she held Mohan's hand tight and said, her eyes spitting fire, "If you hit me once more, that'll be the end of you." Her father, who came in hearing the commotion, chided his daughter softly and tried to lead his son-in-law away.

When his father-in-law tried to pacify him, Mohan got even mor angry and, red-faced, began to scream.

Rameshbabu did not know whether to feel upset about his daughte losing her job or about the way his son-in-law was shouting.

"Look, I'm telling you now. I wanted to marry a working woman so I chose and married one. This was one of my conditions. Now sh has lost her job. I'm not responsible for it. If she doesn't have a job I' have nothing to do with her," he screamed insensitively.

"Why are you talking like this, Mohan? We should think calml particularly when we have problems … But …"

Mohan ranted on without letting him finish, "All that is of n relevance to me. How you solve and what you do, how you'll get bac the job – I don't care. If you can't get her job back, you can keep you daughter with you."

Rameshbabu suddenly lost his temper. But years of experienc helped him control his anger. He was worried that this was turnin into an issue of not just his daughter's job, but of her married lif However, Tara remained unmoved, like a stone. It was difficult t describe the emotion on her face as she turned her eyes on Mohan Was it anger? Disgust? A calmness born out of realization of life truth? It was not clear. But her eyes did not mist over. She had n desire to cry.

Tara, who had grown up like a doll dressed in colourful clothes, ha now woken up, a human being of flesh and blood, a thinking girl, woman with her own likes and dislikes. Since childhood, she ha only known how to obey whatever her mother said, to follow he mother's way of thinking. She never thought on her own. Nor ha she any occasion to do so. Dress, makeup, jewellery, fashion, relative friends – all were prescribed by her mother, while education, subject competitive tests, interviews – were prescribed by her father.

She realized that she had to be better than those in her circle. She mpleted her convent education without any problem. After that, nen she joined college, she understood what beautiful clothes, ss and status meant. When she was in her final year of BA, there s talk of her marriage, at home. Tara accepted all this as very rmal.

When her mother said, "If you do things like this, nobody will arry you," Tara corrected herself immediately. If she was told to have in a certain manner to enable her to find a good match, she ed to do so.

"These days, it's not enough just to have an education. You'll have get a job if you want a good alliance," she was told and after that she s so determined to get a job that she did. She put her money in the nk and saved enough for her dowry.

When she thought of a husband, she thought of his height, looks, ucation, job, status, dowry, gifts, things given conventionally at a dding, et cetera, but not of the man – his emotions, his way of nking, his ideas regarding equality, love and the like.

She heard people certify that the boy was good, intelligent.

What is Good? If he is Intelligent, how would he look? Tara never ought of all these.

In her parents' opinion, Mohan, now her husband, was obviously most eligible young man, the bridegroom.

Tara was in such a state that she didn't even know what she wanted. she had, she would have looked for it in Mohan.

Only now was Tara beginning to realize her lost individuality. A e of deep dissatisfaction started consuming her mind.

Rameshbabu entered the scene. In his opinion, some people in the ice, jealous of women employees, had magnified the case and med her. They were able to prove that Tara had cheated the partment and taken special leave because these days it isn't difficult

to get a doctor to give any certificate you want by offering a hundred rupee note.

To get all this undone, convince everyone, plead with them, spend twenty five thousand and secure a fresh appointment, losing six years' service took – even for a worldly-wise person like Rameshbabu – a whole year.

As days rolled into weeks and weeks into months, Tara's thoughts sharpened.

Mohan came to see Tara two or three times in the year. They talked in monosyllables. He didn't ask her to come back. Nor did she exhibit any keenness to do so.

That day, Rameshbabu was so excited that he jumped out of the autorickshaw and rushed into the house.

"Tara! Amma Tara! My tallee!" his voice, mixed with excitement and happiness, sounded like the temple bell. Vaidehi came out hurriedly.

"Vaidehi, our troubles are over. Here's Tara's appointment order."

Tara, who was reading in the room inside, ran into the hall.

"Here, Amma. Here is your order."

She reached for it eagerly. The sudden rush of tears blurred her vision.

"Tomorrow is a good day. Why don't you join? "

"All right, Nanna," she said. Her voice trembled. It was filled with sorrow.

Her parents understood the cause of her unhappiness and sighed.

Vaidehi, the mother-in-law, was very courteous to the son-in-law when he came to the house.

Rameshbabu, the father-in-law, invited him in with respect and talked enthusiastically.

Then Tara came home.

"Tara! I believe the day after is a good day. Amma said so. Let's go back to our house."

Rameshbabu's face expressed a sort of satisfaction, Vaidehi's a sort of relief …

"I won't come," said Tara. There was no anger or fury in her voice. But the firmness in it rang loud and clear.

Rameshbabu and Vaidehi were momentarily taken aback.

Mohan's face lost colour.

"What's this, Amma?" But Tara didn't let him finish.

"Nanna! That's it. You got me my job and gave me my livelihood. I can't repay my debt to you all my life. But don't ask me to lead a married life with this man."

"Tara …" her mother was about to say something.

Mohan laughed hysterically. Like a thief trying to cover up when caught red-handed. "She seems to have taken the words I said in anger seriously. As husband and wife …"

"Stop it. That's enough! Don't talk any more! I won't come to you! I won't live with you!"

"What do you think of yourself?"

"Whatever I think doesn't concern you … You can file for divorce. Or I will …"

Tara rushed to her room and bolted the door.

"Jeevana Rajakeeyam" was first published in *Andhra Jyoti, Sunday Supplement,* 19 February1995. This version has been translated from *Kadambam,* Sakhya Sahiti, Hyderabad, 1996.

Vivina Murthy

One Step

She lifts her eyes.

Then looks down as his gaze pierces her.

The elders are trying to trace the common links between the two families. They are exchanging witty remarks. The middleman is trying to make both parties feel at ease.

The children, their mouths wide open, are looking alternately at the elders, the food in front of them and the bridegroom and the bride.

The Kapu womenfolk are peeping in through the window to look at the bridegroom. Commotion, bustle and a crowd all around.

Amidst all this, a slight stirring in two hearts, in four eyes.

"Ask all you want to, Baavagaru. My niece will answer everything without the slightest hesitation."

"Is that so? What's your name, Amma?"

"Lalita, Andi."

"What have you studied?"

"Third Form."

Short questions, a song, a sample of her walk.

Murty finds it distasteful …

Terrible! What will she think? That they are examining her as they would an animal!

Lalita is doing all that she is being asked … Will they like me? Will this at least be the last time I'm put through this ordeal?

"Take the girl inside."

The elders get up. The children have already rushed out into the street.

The cart driver yokes the bullocks. The children pile onto the cart. An older man shouts at them.

"We'll see you later."

"My brother and I will look forward to your letter."

"I'll discuss with my bharya and write to you."

"What's there for your wife to say? Everything depends on you."

"We'll take leave of you. Namaskaram. Come, ra. Get onto the cart."

"Come, let's go for jala darshanam." From darkness to light … from hunger to food … two eyes shine … shine two eyes.

It seems the desire in the four eyes has been fulfilled. But someone's head seems to be blocking the view.

The cart moves on. The eyes move through the gaps in the palm leaves and over the bumps on the road. And the one gaze fixed at the window!

Our boy likes your girl. You can come and discuss the terms.

"Baavagaru, I am a small man. I've never dealt with matters like this before. The boy perhaps deserves much more than what you're asking for. But you must also keep in mind my capability."

"If either of you don't get off the high horse, how can we proceed?

Jala darshanam: The tradition of bidding farewell near a lake or a stream, especially in villages.

I'm an old man. I'm making the final decision. My brother says six. He says eight. Seven isn't an auspicious number. So, let six out of the seven be dowry and one a present for the sisters-in-law. What's more ..."

"Annagaru, it's an uphill task for me to arrange for six on the whole."

"Just a minute. Can't you give it? Tell me, for if not, I'll give it myself. Is the girl an outsider? She's the granddaughter of a closely related aunt of mine. As regards the silk dhotis and silver pot, my brother will buy the silk dhotis and Baavagaru will get the silver pot made."

"What you're suggesting doesn't go with our tradition."

"Come to think of it. What is tradition? As an older person, I'm taking the liberty of saying this. It was once a tradition to give things to one's children according to one's ability. It's today's tradition to exploit the other as much as one can. Moreover ..."

"You are an elderly person. Let's accept your word."

"That's right, my dear! If you want to achieve something you should be flexible."

"Okay, let's agree on it."

"But there's a small hitch."

"What is it now? Let's settle everything right away."

"Murty says he's not in a hurry to get married."

"Is that so? Please don't think that we will force him to marry soon."

"He's a modern boy, isn't he? He's asking for a year's time."

"What do you say?"

"Whatever the elders decide ..."

"Let it be! What's a year? It will be over in the blink of an eye. Also, once we have the engagement ... there won't be a problem ... what do you say, Baavagaru?"

"Fine."

My dear Lalita,

You will be surprised and happy to receive this letter. All the foolish people around you will be staring at you. There's jealousy in those looks. Your heart must be beating rapidly. Your forehead must be damp with sweat. But I can't help writing. I'll make use of the year's time to turn you around to my views and ideas. Be bold and reply to me. Write comfortably and sweetly.
I'll look forward to your letter day and night.

To

Mamagaru,
I never thought that you would read, that you could read and that you would reply to my letter to Lalita! Oh! People are capable of anything!
We're going to be married. We aren't doing anything wrong. I too know what's proper.
As for your permission, I don't think it's necessary. I asked my father to let you know about this. I thought he would have.
At least now, hand over my letter to Lalita.
Ask her to reply.

"If he is so arrogant even before he is married, I am worried how he will behave after my daughter …"

"…"

"Leave that aside … Does he have respect for his own father at least? He seems to lack even that …"

"Forget it, this is how today's youngsters behave."

"Today, it's letters! Tomorrow, he'd want her to go to the movies with him! We'll have to send her. Then, he'll ask us to send her to his room!"

"No, no. Don't imagine such terrible things ... You're a headmaster. You're well educated. Where do I have your kind of courage? What a wretched thing! How can we go on giving in to him?"

"Why didn't you consult the girl?"

"She's an ignoramus! What does she know?"

"Why would she not know? She sees films. She reads novels."

"Films and novels! Are these the ones to provide knowledge?"

"If you contradict everything, what can I say?"

"..."

"Their's is a new generation. New ideas. They pay more attention to women's problems than we do. We used to hesitate even to speak to our bharyas during the day. They lock themselves in, day and night! We didn't spend time with our children even for fun, while they even clean up the mess their children make ..."

"So what is your final word?"

"No harm done. See to it that she gets her letter. If she wants to, she'll reply."

"As if she will write. She'll ask me what she should do."

> Received your letter. A short letter. Only four lines. Felt bad. I was angered by the fact that you couldn't understand my ideals.
> As a human being you must have individuality and should not be scared of your parents. This is your life. It's your bharta alone who should matter to you. Your happiness or unhappiness depends only on your bharta.

You say you don't know what to write. That's just an excuse.
Your father must have asked you not to. He's an idiot. He is restricting the natural growth of flowers by building an iron fence around them. I'm finding him more and more disgusting. It's my ill luck that my Lalita, with her tender heart and beautiful looks, should be born to such a man! Doesn't one have to put up with all kinds of problems?
Be brave. Write freely. It's you yourself who has to set your life right. It's you who has to shape your own happiness. We have to give a new definition to the word Love.

"What's the point in crying? Stop it, stop it."

"..."

"Seems to be a good sort. Just a little eccentric."

"..."

"If he's just a talker, it won't be much of a problem bringing him around, my dear."

"I don't know, Masstaru. I tremble. I don't know what to write."

"That's true. Why does he have such an overbearing attitude towards such a young girl?"

"Ratnam, I think the curry is burning."

"Why won't it? When you can't speak straight."

"Look, Lalita, your father is very timid. It would be good if you could resolve this yourself."

"See you later, Maastaru ..."

"Okay, Ratnam. Let's assume we'll suggest that they cancel the engagement as you say. He'll cancel it. The whole village knows that they have exchanged letters. Will anyone else come forward

to marry her? Even if someone does, not knowing what has happened, will he keep quiet when he comes to know about it? There are no secrets in village life, don't you agree?"

"I don't know. It's all her fate. She has to suffer even though she hasn't committed any mistake."

"That's how it is. Think of them as already being married. Put up with things. Once she's married, will any woman let the man have a say? Look at yourself, for instance!"

"How funny! The woman just shouts without reason. It's only the man who does everything."

> You want me to write and let you know what I mean by knowledge. I'll write. But can you understand? You should be born with it. It should increase with age. People with knowledge perform good deeds. They think great things. But why should we write about such profound things when we should be writing about love?
> I have known right from the beginning just how knowledgeable your father is. From where would you get the knowledge to write about interesting things? When I look at your letters, I wonder whether you are writing them or whether your father is dictating them to you.
> If you can't please your fiance even this much now, how will you satisfy him after marriage?

Eleven letters have been exchanged.

> That's good. You're not as much of a brute as your father. That's why you listened to me. Your

handwriting has improved. The list of books you're reading is increasing. You are shedding the foul odour of your rural background … Your letter bears proof that all this has happened. And the question you have raised. That seems to have come from your heart. When? When our eyes met for the first time. It slowly became bigger and bigger, under my training. It has stood before me through your letter –

What's love?
Lalita! My Lalita! Oh, Lalita!
Love means
The patience to tolerate each other,
The intelligence to recognize each other,
The heart to respect each other,
And the tears that one can shed for the other.
If you want to learn about this in more detail, remember – the eyes can tell, dreams can speak. And hearts that experience, know all.

Three more letters have been written.

What does individuality mean? I don't like your attitude, Lalita. Beauty is synonymous with woman. She should think in a beautiful manner. It should cause happiness. This book that says love doesn't go with people who have individuality, is trash.
You shouldn't think so seriously about such books.
You say it's not right to address your father as mee babu.

Mee babu literally means your father, but is used only in an insulting and derogatory sense in the Godavari districts.

I don't like your saying it's not right.
You shouldn't think of anything other than us and our family. I think your father is making you say all these stupid things these days. That fellow is wrecking your beautiful future.
He may have fathered you. But does that mean he need have no respect for you as a woman, and read your letters? How can he force his antiquated ideas on you? How can he prevent your natural growth? And most of all, how dare he come in my way?
Now, listen to the truth I'm telling you.
To prove one's love, one has to sacrifice everything. The woman has to become one with the man – forgetting everything. Remember, this time your letter must be beautiful.

To

Mamagaru,
It's been a long time since I wrote to you. It's two weeks since Lalita wrote a letter. I can easily understand what must have happened. You have no right to control my fiancée even if you both are her parents. I know her mind. It's mine. Just because you have borne her, she is not your property. If I don't receive a letter from her in a week's time, I won't be human. I can break off this engagement.

Lalita's face is red.

Though Narayana is seated on an easy chair, he feels as though he is perched on thorns.

"Why don't you understand what we are saying?"

"That's it! He earns more than a thousand. They say he has a house and land."

"Whether he has or hasn't is another matter. The whole village is talking about these letters. When I said how would she, such an ignoramus, know what to write, her teacher advised her to write. What has happened has happened. The cloth has fallen on thorns. We have to remove it gingerly, without tearing it."

"Even girls who are not tainted aren't getting married."

"You are too much! What's her fault? Were we able to tell her categorically not to write? She is tainted only because of our foolishness."

For a while her father and mother do not speak.

Lalita is sitting on the doorstep with her head between her knees, pulling at her toenails. Her mother, who wants to comment on that unbecoming posture, keeps quiet.

It's the fourth day after he received the letter. As soon as Narayana got the letter, he called Lalita and asked her to write. The mother keeps egging her to write every hour. Lalita doesn't say either yes or no.

Her father probes her mother for information every day.

He respects the dignity that he had not noticed before in his daughter.

He tries to persuade her using both direct and indirect means.

Finally, both of them pin her down.

The many books that she has now read float in front of Lalita's eyes.

The arrogance in Murty's letters, his authority – she feels these like a porcupine that has entered her heart and spread its thorny quills.

Her heart is like a stomach taut with undigested food.

The past, with her village background, her lack of education and

ideas, makes her scared of the future. The helplessness of her parents who should have been looking after her wellbeing, stifles her.

The present, with her knowledge of books and the awareness Murty's letters have brought her, assures her there is no need to be afraid of the future. It makes her feel that a woman need not be dependent.

"You don't utter a word. Do you think this is funny? When your father, tall as a tree, stands in front of you in flesh and blood and asks you …"

Not paying heed to her mother's words, Lalita goes into her room and shuts the door.

Narayana calls out to his wife who is about to follow her.

"Don't bother. She'll write."

"She'll write, she will! After all, her nanna is not so different from the others! You gave much more trouble to my nanna. Will anything be achieved if a woman stands firm? She and her stupid ways!"

Those days such things used to begin after marriage. Maybe they begin before marriage these days. At any time, has the goodness of the baavagaru ever … Narayana muses, looking in the direction in which his wife has gone.

Cancel the engagement, Bhaddirraju, the Headmaster, feels like advising. But who is he to do so? What if she doesn't find another match? And even if she does find another, what if the marriage doesn't last once he gets to know of this affair?

"It's all because of me."

"It doesn't matter who is responsible. She and I are the ones who are crying now."

Narayana's words pierce him like a bullet.

Bhaddirraju looks at the sky.

The red rays of the all-observing sun are wonderful. The pleasant

breeze touches the two of them as they sit on the stones. Bhaddirraju thinks that the crest of the temple looks stately and tall.

"There's a possibility that the girl might actually be happy with the boy's modern ideas. There's also a possibility that the girl may suffer because of the occasional crude streak in him. You have ensured that her happiness is not in our hands. Oh, Lord! You have the final say in this lottery. Give a favourable decision."

Bhaddirraju lifts his hands to pay obeisance.

"Please forgive me. What have you done? In anger, we blame others for any act."

"No, it's not that. I'm not hurt by your words. I'm only praying to God for her happiness."

"Everyone gives away their kooturu in marriage not knowing whether they'll be happy or not. I'm giving my kooturu in marriage with the certainty that she won't."

"If the boy doesn't like us, it's our fate. But she'll certainly be happy with him. Let's go, I'll try and persuade Lalita. She'll write the letter."

Both of them proceed towards the house.

Bhaddiraju can't understand whether the fault lies with the boy or with the ideas of the youth of this generation.

At home, they meet Narayana's widowed sister, Sundari.

"When did you come?"

"Let's save the pleasantries for later – however much we knock, Lalita isn't opening the door – we can smell something burning inside."

They break into a run. There is fear, commotion!

"Amma! Lalita! Lalita!"

They bang the doors and windows.

A door opens immediately.

Lalita comes out, looking like a diamond that has just been polished.

She is like the metal shaped in the furnace. She is like a newborn child washed clean of afterbirth.

"What were you doing inside, Amma?" The mother breaks down.

"I was writing a letter."

Her mother's face brightens. Her father's face registers no emotion. A smile on Bhaddirraju's face.

"What letter?" asks the aunt.

"Nanna, please read this letter."

"No, tallee. You must have written something that'll not hurt him. I have faith in you. I'll post it," Narayana takes it with trembling hands.

"As it is, he's been calling us brutes because we read your letters. No, we won't read your letter, tallee," says her mother.

"Nanna! You must read the letter! You must read it out to everyone! There are no secrets in it."

Bhaddirraju takes the letter from Narayana's hand.

Murty,

I re-read all the letters you've written to me till now. I also recalled all my replies. Yours are all a sign of the same arrogance painted with new colours. Mine are all a proof of our age-old bondage and helplessness, which have been newly painted by you. That's why I burnt all the letters and appeased the anger in my heart.

As far as marriage is concerned, mine may not take place. As all my people think that marriage is the ultimate in life, they're worried.

Once married, what do women do when they lose their bhartas? After the marriage, what happens to

women whose bhartas desert them? My condition is no worse than theirs.

You may ask about my livelihood! Widows may get their husbands' property. The court may award compensation to women who've been deserted. What if I can't get married because I'm tainted? I can lead my life cleaning vessels. I can earn my living stitching clothes. Those who are prepared to work will definitely find work. If we succumb to the fear within our heart, then the world will not be visible to us. If we get rid of those fears, then the whole world will be ours.

Goodbye! Forever.

The lucky one who escaped being your bharya by a hair's breadth,

Lalita.

As soon as the Headmaster finished reading out the letter, Lalita says, "Nanna, post it if you wish. If you don't, I will do it myself."

"O Adugu" was first published in *Andhra Jyoti:Sachitra Vara Patrika*, 8 February 1985. This version has been translated from *Pravaham: Vivina Murthy Kathalu,* R K Publications, Visakhapatnam, 1994.

Volga

Ayoni

My beginning to write this story today is itself the reason for this story. I love stories. Putting the cot out in the open under the sky, lying next to my ammamma and watching the moon, I would fall asleep listening to the stories she narrated.

On rainy nights, listening to my ammamma's voice amidst the drip-drop of the drizzle, I would cover myself warmly with a blanket, and if that were not enough, I would almost curl into my ammamma's tummy and listen to her stories. Lost in her tales, winter nights would quickly pass by. Summer nights were never long enough for her stories. After I learnt how to read and write, after I could read the Telugu primer by myself, I wrote my first story. I don't remember it now. Some time later, with a lot of affection, my nanna bought me a *Chandamama* and after reading it for two years, I wrote a story in my ninth year. I sent it to the magazine. It was not published. Nobody knows about this. I never told anybody – not my nanna, not my amma, not my ammamma. Not even my friend, Radharani. I looked forward eagerly to its publication for about six or seven months. Then I forgot all about it. Now, three years after that story, when I feel like writing a story once again, I remember that *Chandamama* story, my first one.

There is no connection between that story and the one I want to write now.

How wonderful that story was! How good the people in it! How well they looked after the princess with the beautiful white wings who came down to them! They gave her all she wanted. They listened to the wonders of the world she came from. How they loved the soft white wings of that little girl, the innocence-lit eyes of that bird-child, her soft feet and her teeny-weeny palms! They made the most comfortable bed for her. They decorated her with garlands of parijata flowers. They made sweet payasam for her. In spite of all this, she yearned for her mother and father. She said she wanted to go back to her world. So, with heavy hearts, they sent her back. Spreading her wings and flapping them gently, the bird-child flew off into the sky.

After having written such a wonderful story, my new story embarrasses me. I feel upset. That story was my dream. This story is my own story. I, who had dreamt such a beautiful dream in my ninth year … how transformed I am after three years … how nightmare-like my life has become! I want to tell everybody what I am today. By telling this story, I want to prove that I am not the person people around me think I am, but the person who wrote the *Chandamama* story. That's my desire. And it has been tormenting me so much that the only reason I have remained alive this last year is to write this story. I will die after writing it.

If I had found the right word I was looking for, for this story, if only I had known it, I would have written it last year itself and died. When I was still unsure about how to write it, I found the right word. Bhagyam akka and I were lying down and chatting, when there was an announcement on the radio, "You will now listen to a song from the movie *Lavakusa* …"

I had not listened to music for two years. Songs are sweet to the ears. There is always something good in them. Worried that I was not

beautiful or pure or good enough to be able to listen to them, I had stopped listening to songs for the last two years. I would go far away from them. When I was about to leave the room Bhagyam akka stopped me. I loved the songs from *Lavakusa*. I had seen the film four or five times. I even used to sing some of its songs. I have forgotten them now.

"We will narrate the story of Sri Rama. Listen to the story of the great and chaste Sita ..." the words of the song were on the radio. Bhagyam akka was talking to me about the movie and the song.

"Raghupati saw his wife come to him and asked her to prove her chastity ..."

Bhagyam akka, her eyes filled with tears, abused Rama, "A brainless idiot. Suspicion on a woman who is an ayonija! Why this test for the wife of Rama, the embodiment of dharma?"

I asked, "What does ayonija mean?"

"I'll tell you what it means. Sita was not born like everyone else. That's why she's called an ayonija. She was born on the edge of a plough."

"How's everyone born?"

Bhagyam akka laughed uncontrollably. Saying, "Like this," she put her hand on my stomach and moved it down to the channel through which children are born.

"Chee!" I exclaimed with disbelief.

"Why do you say Chee? Children are born that way. I saw it all when Kamala was delivering her child. That's called a yoni. Sita was not born from there. That's why she is an ayonija. We are all yonijas. Sita is an ayonija."

Bhagyam akka laughed again.

Yoni, yonija, ayonija ... something was happening to me. A sudden pain shot through my head.

Sita's an ayonija. I don't know anything about being born like that. But I can now write about what I have been wanting to all these days.

How wonderful it would have been if I were born an Ayoni! How I love the word Ayoni! Are you angry? Are you disgusted? Do you find it distasteful? But you don't know anything about my anger and disgust. If you did, you would wish that my desire was fulfilled. You are all good mothers, aren't you?

Now I'll tell you my story. That day, the last of my good days, I remember it well … I have forgotten many other days but I have made it a point to remember that day … I keep recalling it because I am scared that I might forget it … It was the fourth of January . . . The exams having ended that day, they had declared Sankranti holidays. All through Sankranti, I used to get up very early in the morning. I loved drawing muggulu. I drew really big ones. I'd sprinkle turmeric, kumkum and banti petals on them. I have only heard my ammamma talk about gobbemmalu but I have never used them. I couldn't find any cow dung. That day I drew a muggu in the form of a snake. A snake couple. How long and broad, how twisted and entwined they were! After I finished the muggu, I was afraid of it myself. Imagining that the snakes had come alive and were entwining themselves around me, I panicked and ran into the house.

Almost as if the snakes had got wind of my imagination, they came that evening and caught hold of me.

What kind of snakes were they? Black, with huge heads like hoods, spitting venom. They came by car. I was walking beside the car. Since it was winter, it was already dark by six. I was walking, happy that the exams were over, angry that I had lost the game of carrom at Radharani's house, and scared that Amma would scold me for coming late. The car was black, it gleamed. I was about to cross, looking at my reflection in the car's mirror, when two snakes

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Gobbemmalu: Small balls made of fresh cow dung with flowers placed on them. They are put at the centre of muggulu, the decorative patterns drawn in front of the house, during Sankranti, the harvest month.

closed in around me and dragged me into the car. They spewed venom on me. I thought I was dead.

How good it would have been to die! But I didn't. It was those cobras who brought me here. It was hell. For the first time I learnt the dreadful meaning of hunger, fear and darkness. Prior to this, I only knew that if I was hungry, I could eat tasty food. If I was scared, I had the security of my amma's lap or my ammamma's stomach. When it was almost dark, I knew the happiness of the lights coming on and the sky filling up with the moon and the stars. How can I express my fear at not having food when I was hungry and thrown into a dark room because I cried for food? If I were to get over my hunger, if the darkness were to disappear, I had to do what they asked me to. A huge bull-like man fell on top of me and tore my yoni.

There was a spate of blood. I became unconscious.

But I got some food. A state where I didn't know if I was taking in food or blood.

The same task three days a week. I find my yoni disgusting. In my childhood, my amma and ammamma would hide it very carefully. Even I had not seen it except during my bath. I knew nothing about it. Nobody told me about it. My amma and ammamma told me in many ways that I should not touch it and not allow anybody else to touch it or even see it. I only knew that it was "shame, shame." But I used to like it. Especially when I saw boys naked I used to feel at peace with myself for being a girl and not having a horrible tail hanging between my legs like that. It was as if I had escaped a great disaster. I used to pity boys. I used to feel sorry that the poor things had to put up with that sickening tail dangling between their legs all their lives. Beyond that I knew nothing about these organs. Nor did I know their names. Once Radharani said she knew their names and would tell me, but for some reason she didn't.

After coming here, I have stopped pitying men. After knowing that

men can turn that tail into a poisoned knife and the horn of a rhino, I am terrified of them.

I was ten then. Men came three days a week. They had some diseases. If they pierced me, it seems, their disease would be cured. The moment they entered the room, I would cry, be scared. But I was not supposed to cry. If I did they would throw me into a dark room and starve me. If I thought of not crying but closing my eyes, the man would not allow me to do so. He would ask me to look. I would keep looking.

At that time I was not a small girl. Not a human being. Perhaps not even a living being. Only a yoni. That's all. That's the only thing. A small hole. All those who came there wanted that hole. They buried their diseases there and left. I? Who am I? What am I? Am I the hand that mixes the food? Am I the mouth that eats? Am I the stomach that's filled as soon as food reaches there? Or am I only the yoni that feeds me?

Everybody saw me only as a yoni. They made me feel repulsed by it. I am not that, I am apart from it. Please talk to me, treat me as a human being, as a small child. Who's there to listen to me? Where are Amma, Ammamma, Appa?

For everyone, I am a Yoni …

When I know men are approaching, I can taste fear in my mouth. When I hear angry male voices or their loud laughter, I feel as if my ears are bursting. I shrink within myself. I try to withdraw further into that place where my fear originates. However much I shrink, I am still seen by them. I have not yet found a place to escape and hide from them.

When I was a kid, I hid myself behind a coal sack in the backyard one day while playing hide and seek. Nobody could find me. I kept expecting that someone or the other would, but no one came. Finally,

I got scared and came out on my own. At that time I was afraid of being alone, but how I wish I could now find a place like that where no one can find me!

There are many adults here. It's said they spend their nights in pleasure. Bhagyam akka says, "There's no pleasure, no nothing – only hardship for food."

Bhagyam akka knows my pain.

"When you grow older you'll get used to it, it won't be so painful," she says.

Years go by. I am growing. As I grow older, my desire only deepens – if only I didn't have this one organ!

Bhagyam akka laughs when I say this to her. "If that's not there, there would be no world," she says. Does the world then exist only with pain? Does the world exist only with violence?

"This pain is only for people like us, isn't it? Aren't a lot of people happy? Children who grow up with their parents don't have this pain, do they?" asks Bhagyam akka.

I don't know. Don't they have it? I wonder whether they too will be allowed to live without some pain or the other. But what have I to do with the fortunate ones? I don't want this. They brought me here only because of this. They turned me into a revolting dirty pit and a diseased mound. They brought all kinds of diseases into my body. I am even scared of the little kids I sometimes see outside.

Would any among them become like me? How many such hells are there? How many children like me are thinking of dying? How many more will become like me? If all this has to stop, what should be done?

As for myself, I want to become an ayoni. If you think my desire is abhorrent, stop this cruelty. Stab to death those cobras that carry away little girls because of their yonis. Stop this trade. As you are incapable of doing it, you show your disgust towards me. You say my story is repugnant.

But, you know, I did not mention in my story for *Chandamama* whether the winged child that came from the world of birds had a yoni or not. The question of the child being an ayonija or an ayoni did not even arise. That child was so beautiful! How wonderful the world was when that child came here.

If there were a world like that now, perhaps I wouldn't have had this desire.

If I were to write that story now, would I say that men wound thorny wires around her wings? Would I write that they threw chilli powder into her innocent eyes? Would I write that they crushed the muddabant flower-like nose of the bird-child? Would I write that rivers of hot tears flowed from the child's eyes? Would I write that, at last, the child, having turned into a mass of pain and tears, could not fly, but died, falling into the dust and mire?

I myself don't know what I would write.

But for now I can only write this ugly story, not that beautiful one.

Now that I have written it, I will die.

I waited for six or seven months to see if my story would be published in the *Chandamama*.

As this story will not be published anywhere, I don't have to look forward to it.

I can die at once. I am dying.

(*Author's note: This story is dedicated to young Sweta who everybody knows of, to the many kids who died in the recent past, due to sexual abuse, in Hyderabad and to all the children around the world who are sacrificed in the sex trade.*)

"Ayoni" was first published in *Ahwanam*, May 1994. This is a reworked version of the translation from *Prayogam: Rajakeeya Kathalu-2*, Manavi Prachuranalu, Hyderabad, 1995. The original translation was first published in *Volga, The Woman Unbound: Selected Short Stories*, Authors & Writers India Limited, Hyderabad, 1997.

Kuppili Padma

Sooty Kitchen Rag

I cannot find a rag even after searching the cupboard through and through for ten minutes.

It is really hard working in a kitchen without a rag. It's been four or five days since the old one was shred to bits and became unusable. I did want to find another but out of sheer apathy didn't bother and the search for a new one began only when I burnt my hand straining water from cooked rice with the old rag.

Finally, I open a bundle of old clothes. Some strong, some faded, some short, some tight – meant to be given to the steel saman seller.

After searching a little more I find the right one. Not faded, but frayed around the neck.

Amma's blouse. The one she forgot when she was here last.

I take the blouse into the kitchen and start working comfortably.

Looking at the blouse, Amma comes to mind. With which sari would this blouse have matched?

The sound of the doorbell.

I open the door.

Janaki!

She lives in the same colony. They are from Machilipatnam. Her

husband works in the Irrigation Department. Two daughters. One son.

Janaki finds it so difficult to manage housework and kitchen work that she rarely visits anyone unnecessarily.

After the usual exchange of pleasantries Janaki asks, "Could you please teach me English every day?"

Could you teach me how to make a wire bag? How to knit a sweater? How to make mango squash? I have come across people in my colony asking only such questions, so Janaki's request seems odd.

"I'll teach you. But how will you find the time for it?" I ask.

"I may have to give up cooking once a day at least. But I can't give up learning English," Janaki replies.

I am intrigued.

"My children just don't respect me. They don't pay attention to anything I say. They only turn to their father. He has neither the patience nor the time to answer them. As for me, I don't have the education to clear their doubts. That's why I'm thinking of doing my BA. I have to take interest in my younger daughter's and son's education, at least. That the children who clung to our saris till yesterday ignore us today because we don't know anything really hurts," Janaki says.

A week ago my daughter returned from the summer computer class. When I asked, What did they teach you? she replied, You don't know anything about computers, do you? and looked out anxiously for her father. As soon as her father returned she began chattering to him like a parrot.

Should I now learn computers, like Janaki, who wants to learn English? Should I?

"Okay, I'll teach you," I say.

Even when I go into the kitchen and start working after Janaki leaves, her words keep coming back.

Amma!

Should the mother who stakes her life to give birth need these qualifications to be respected?

Not that she needs them, but isn't it very normal for growing kids to ignore their mother?

I remember well ...

Mothers today hold degrees and so have a little or a lot of economic independence, but in my mother's generation, those possessing degrees were very few.

Unlike the mothers of today, mothers then were at a loss when it came to making their children sit with them and do their homework. Patient fathers or tuition masters or others at home like father's brothers or mother's brothers, who were educated, would make them do their homework and clear their doubts.

Once when I stood first in school, they gave me a cup as a prize.

When I came home after the function, Amma, who was standing by the door waiting for me, asked excitedly, What did they give you? Without paying her attention I pushed past to show the cup to my father who was lying down somewhere inside the house reading the paper.

I didn't know then that such a thing would be disrespectful to my mother or that it would hurt her.

Getting up from a deep sleep in the middle of the night to soothe a child who has woken up after wetting the bed, then picking up the child and walking it up and down till it is lulled back to sleep, carrying the child all over the place trying to feed it, wiping its runny nose, looking after the child night and day when it has a fever – all these are the duties of a mother.

The many mothers who serve regardless of what happens to their own bodies! Can I really count them?

When my elder daughter was a baby I had forgotten the luxury of washing my hair. No sooner would I step into the bathroom after putting

the child to sleep and sighing At last!, than I would hear a loud cry, as if somebody had woken her up and beaten her. No question of a bath now! By the time I had hurriedly poured a couple of mugs over myself, wrapped a sari around my wet body and picked up the crying child in my arms, carrying her up and down to quieten her, I would forget even to plait my hair.

Before she had a child, the teacher next door would wear starched Venkatagiri saris with all the pleats in place, dainty as a doll. Now, what with looking after the child, the kitchen work, eating hurriedly after serving her husband, packing her husband's lunchbox, feeding the child, packing its things in a bag, not bothering whether her blouse matches her sari, keeping the slippery nylex sari in place with pins, dropping the child at the creche, signing the register hurriedly – her day is taken up with all this.

"Even if I wanted to wear starched cotton saris when I went out or attended a function, would it be possible? Don't I have to carry these children? Cottons crush in a minute. I dislike nylex saris but have to wear them," she often moans.

Why don't fathers carry children?

Some time ago I attended a meeting on Women's Rights. The wife of the one who enthusiastically wrote essays on women, the wife of the one who kept giving lectures, the wife of a clerk – not just one, but every mother was carrying babies.

Man thinks that a mother alone must do all the work.

Even children think so.

Only the naive mother does not question why she should do it.

What if I tell amma now that I didn't mean to ignore her? What will she say?

She will laugh affectionately.

The doorbell rings.

I open the door.

Aruna from the house opposite.

"It's almost three. Because you didn't come, I came instead," she says.

Three already! Every day the two of us go together to pick up my younger daughter and her son from school. Today, preoccupied with my thoughts, I had forgotten all about it.

"Coming, I'm coming," I say as I push my feet into my slippers, lock up and leave dressed as I am.

Now I don't bother whether my sari is nice, my hair combed, my face powdered, but would I have ever gone out in this state during my college days? I would look at my face not once, but ten times before I left.

I used to feel irritated with my mother who went around oblivious of her crushed sari or her dishevelled hair.

How often does my elder daughter get annoyed with the way I look now!

Walking briskly and seeing Aruna lag behind I turn around and ask, "Why are you walking so slowly?"

"I've sprained my leg."

"When? How? Did you apply anything?"

"I fell off the cycle, and hurt myself," she says showing me her elbow.

"Cycle?" I ask confused.

"Yes. I am thinking of admitting my children in St Ann's next year. It's very far, you know. A rickshaw twice a day would be very expensive. Not only that, the elder one's learning music. It's difficult every day to attend the class and return home. If I buy a small vehicle I can drop the children at school. I can take the girl to her music class. I don't know how to cycle ... If you know how to cycle, I believe it's easy to balance the vehicle. That's why I go to the grounds early in the morning to learn cycling. This morning I fell down."

We reach the school while Aruna is still talking. We pick up the kids and return.

Right from the time he returns from school till the evening, my elder boy's face is dull. To "Babu, why are you like that?" he replies weakly, "I am all right," but does not tell me what is bothering him.

The elder girl, however, jumps up every time the bell rings, opens the door, looks at the visitor, and returns with a subdued smile on her face. When she keeps going out into the street and then inside like a cat on hot coals, I try to find out, "What's it, Amma? You seem excited?" She says, "No, I am not," and does not tell me anything.

Around seven, it is the elder girl who opens the door the moment the doorbell rings. No sooner does she catch a glimpse of her father on the threshold, her face lights up, and even before he steps into the house she announces happily, "They gave me my progress report today."

Before her father can respond, she says, "You said you would send me on the excursion if I came first, didn't you?"

"Oh, sure … I'll also buy you a nice frock," he says as she hands him her report card. He signs the card without even looking at her marks.

Are exams for children? The exams are actually for their mothers. Isn't it the mothers who prevent the children, swaying with sleep, from falling on the ground by propping them up as they sit with their backs against them, who give them tea so that their drooping eyes are kept wide open, and make them write their exams? But the signature on the progress cards is that of the father. That happiness, that pleasure, that pride – only for the father?

"Where's yours?" I ask the elder boy.

"They didn't give it," he replies.

"Didn't give it?" the father asks suspiciously and the boy withdraws

further. After much cajoling and pleading he reluctantly pulls out his report card from his bag and hands it over. He has secured only seventy and seventy five where earlier he had ninety and ninety five.

So that is what has happened! That's the reason behind our son's dull eyes.

"He is young yet full of lies. Take care. What have you been doing? Can't you take proper care of the children? If he gets habituated to lying, what a problem it will be! Great! How great is your rearing!" he shouts jumping all over me.

Bringing up!

The same father who proudly claimed, "She's my daughter," when it was possible tc find a bridegroom who demanded less dowry in view of the beauty and modesty of my elder sister, almost beat my mother saying, "Is this the way to raise girls? Shouldn't you keep an eye on them always? Your ideas of child rearing!" when my younger sister was adamant about marrying the boy she loved.

"Why aren't you getting up? Isn't the food ready?"

I go into the kitchen as he starts shouting.

As I remove the heated pot of rasam from the stove, my eyes fall on the kitchen rag.

To drain the rice, to remove the vessel from the stove, to hold the vessel in place while stirring the curry, to wipe the hands – for these and so many other things the kitchen rag is indispensable. But has anyone ever considered it a valuable thing?

This, Amma's blouse, which has been used for a week in the kitchen and has completely lost its original colour and look, reminds me of Amma.

Is there any difference between the mother who works day and night, who sacrifices all her energy for her children, and this kitchen rag?

My children ignore me today in much the same way that I once

ignored my mother. This is what has happened to Janaki. Tomorrow Janaki's daughters and my own will face the same situation.

Even though times have changed and modern conveniences adorn the house, the rag has not disappeared from the kitchen. Even though an extremely civilized world surrounds us, the woes of a mother will never end.

"Masigudda" was first published in *Andhra Jyoti*, 11 January1994. This version has been translated from *Manasuko Daham*, Mata Publications, Hyderabad, 1994.

Notes on Contributors

Gurazada Apparao (1862-1915), a poet, playwright and short story writer, who wrote both in Telugu and English, was a reformer who fought against the evils that plagued the society. His short story "Diddubatu" is considered by many as the first short story in Telugu. His play, *Kanyasulkam* is the most popular amongst his works.

Sripada Subrahmanyasastry (1891-1961), born in a family of Sanskrit scholars, chose to write in Telugu, against his father's wishes. Although his short stories were more popular, he had also written plays, novellas and essays. He was the founding editor of the fortnightly *Prabuddhandhra*. His writings focused on the social problems of his day. Though influenced by Kandukuri Veeresalingam, he did not desist from criticizing the great social reformer for his overzealous role in widow remarriage.

Chalam (1894-1979), known as Gudipati Venkata Chalam, is a short story writer, novelist, playwright, essayist, poet and translator whose works were greatly influenced by Veeresalingam and Freud. He fought against various forms of social oppression and is most remembered for his advocacy of freedom for women – both on the physical and mental levels. His writings focused on the education of women and children. Amongst his works, the novels *Maidanam Aruna* and *Brahmaneekam* are very well-known.

Kanuparti Varalakshmamma (1896-1978), a freedom fighter and a social worker, fought for the promotion of women's education. Her writings were focused on women's issues.

Sarada Lekhalu (1928), a series of writings in the form of letters concerning women's problems, is well-known amongst her works. She was the editor of the journal *Grihalakshmi*. She had been honoured with the Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi Award.

Kodavatiganti Kutumbarao (1908-1980) worked as an editor of different magazines, including *Chandamama*. Apart from short stories, novels and plays, he has authored autobiographical essays. He also wrote on education, particularly with a view to popularize science. He invented a new form in Telugu called Galpika (sketch). He brought into his writings the much neglected aspect of economic freedom of women. *Karunyam*, *Chaduvu*, *Yendamavulu* and *Savitadevi Diareelu* are some of his well-known works.

Rachakonda Viswanathasastry (1922-1993), popularly known as Raavi Sastry, was a writer of short stories, novels and plays and a lawyer who worked for the downtrodden. He wrote in the north coastal Andhra dialect. Well-known amongst his works are the novel *Alpajeevi* and the short story collection, *Aaru Saaraa Kathalu*. His play *Nijam* is supposed to have brought about a change in the law relating to rape. He was first associated with Arasam (Progressive Writers Association) and later with Virasam (Revolutionary Writers Association). He was the recipient of the Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi Award.

Sivaraju Subbulakshmi (b. 1925) is amongst the earliest Telugu women writers. She has to her credit short story collections *Vodduku Cherina Onti Keratam*, *Kavyasundarikatha* and *Magatajeevi Chivari Choopu* and novels *Adrushtarekha Neelangetu Ayyagaru* and *Teerpu*. She has also written prose poems which were published in some magazines.

Abburi Chaya Devi (b. 1933), whose writing encompasses varied genres, has several published works to her credit. These include a collection of short stories, *Abburi Chaya Devi Kathalu*, a biographical story about her father, *Mrityunjaya*, a collection of essays, *Vyasachitralu*, lessons on doll making, *Bommalu Cheyadam* and essays on J Krishnamurti's philosophy, *Mana Samasyalu – Krishnaji Samadhanalu*. She retired as a deputy librarian from the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She has won several awards including the Rachayitri Uttama Rachana Puraskaram from Potti Sriramulu Telugu University.

Kethu Viswanathareddy (b. 1937) belongs to an agricultural family, holds a doctorate on toponomy and has taught in colleges and universities. *Japtu*, *Kathalu*, *Ichagni* and *Drishti* are his short story collections. He has edited thirteen volumes of Kodavatiganti Kutumbarao's works. He has also published *Chaduvu Kathalu* and several educational pieces. Among the important awards he has received are the Sahitya Akademi Award and Potti Sriramulu Telugu University Award.

Kavanasarma (b. 1939) is the pen name of Kandula Varaha Narasimha Sarma. A retired professor of civil engineering at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, he is now working as the Principal of VITAM, Parvathipuram. He has been a consultant to various government and private agencies. He has, to his credit, about eighty stories and six novels, apart from plays and articles – including technical papers in national and international journals. Some of his important works are *Kavanasarma Kathalu* and *Vyangya Kavanalu*. He received many awards including the Potti Sriramulu Telugu University Award for his satire and humour.

Ranganayakamma (b. 1939) is one of the leading Telugu women writers of this century. Apart from sixteen short story collections, thirteen novels and thirteen collections of essays, she has four abridged renderings and two collaborative translations from English. Some of her well-known works are *Peka Medalu*, *Balipeetham*, *Sweet Home*, *Janaki Vimukti*, *Ramayana Vishavruksham* and *Marx Capital Parichayam*.

P Sathyavathi (b. 1940), one of the leading women writers in Andhra Pradesh, is also a lecturer of English. She has to her credit three novels, *Marrineeda*, *Padmavyuham* and *Godugu* and two short story collections, *Sathyavathi Kathalu* and *Illalakagane*. She has been honoured with many awards including the Chaso Award.

Indraganti Janakibala (b. 1945) has written novels, short stories and poetry. After taking voluntary retirement from a state government organization, she now works as a consultant to Asmita Resource Centre for Women, Hyderabad. She is also a radio artist. Some of her best known works are the short story collections *Prayojanam*, *Atma Drishti* and *Andaram Prekshakulame* and the novels, *Nijanikee Abaddhanikee Madhya* and *Vennela Matti*. She has published articles on film lyrics and a feature article "Telusukonave Yuvati," on the emancipation of women.

Vivina Murthy (b. 1948), a central government employee, has to his credit novels and short stories including the novel, *Vyapara Bandhalu*, the short story, "Maro Rukkulu," and the experimental piece, "Kathaprahelika." Although he has written in different genres, the short story remains his favourite. *Pravaham: Vivina Murthy Kathalu* is his latest work. Six of his short stories have won awards in different journals.

Volga (b. 1950) is the pen name of P Lalitha Kumari, an activist who works as the Secretary of Asmita Resource Centre for Women, Hyderabad. One of the leading feminist writers in Telugu, she has written novels, short stories, poems and articles. The Central Sahitya Akademi chose her to represent India in a Writers' Meet in China. Among her well-known works are *Sahaja, Sweccha*, *Akaasamlo Sagam*, *Manavi*, *Rajakeeya Kathalu* and *Prayogam: Rajakeeya Kathalu 2*.

Kuppili Padma (b. 1971) is a writer and journalist with about fifty short stories in various magazines and journals. She has to her credit two volumes of short stories, *Manasuko Daham* and *Mukta* and four novels, *Samundram*, *Mahita*, *Ahalya* and *Padaga Nidalo*. A regular contributor to Telugu dailies, magazines and journals, her writings focus on women's issues and matters of general importance. She also writes scripts and stories for the visual media.

Alladi Uma and **M Sridhar** teach English at the University of Hyderabad and have been doing collaborative work in translation. Their translations as well as articles on the subject have appeared in many journals. They published a translation of a collection of short stories by Volga entitled *The Woman Unbound: Selected Short Stories*. They won the Jyeshtha Literary Award and Katha Commendation Prize for their translations. They have helped the Sahitya Akademi bring out two special issues of *Indian Literature* on contemporary Telugu writing. Their translation of Rachakonda Viswanathasastry's *Govulostunnayi Jagratta* is being brought out by the Sahitya Akademi.

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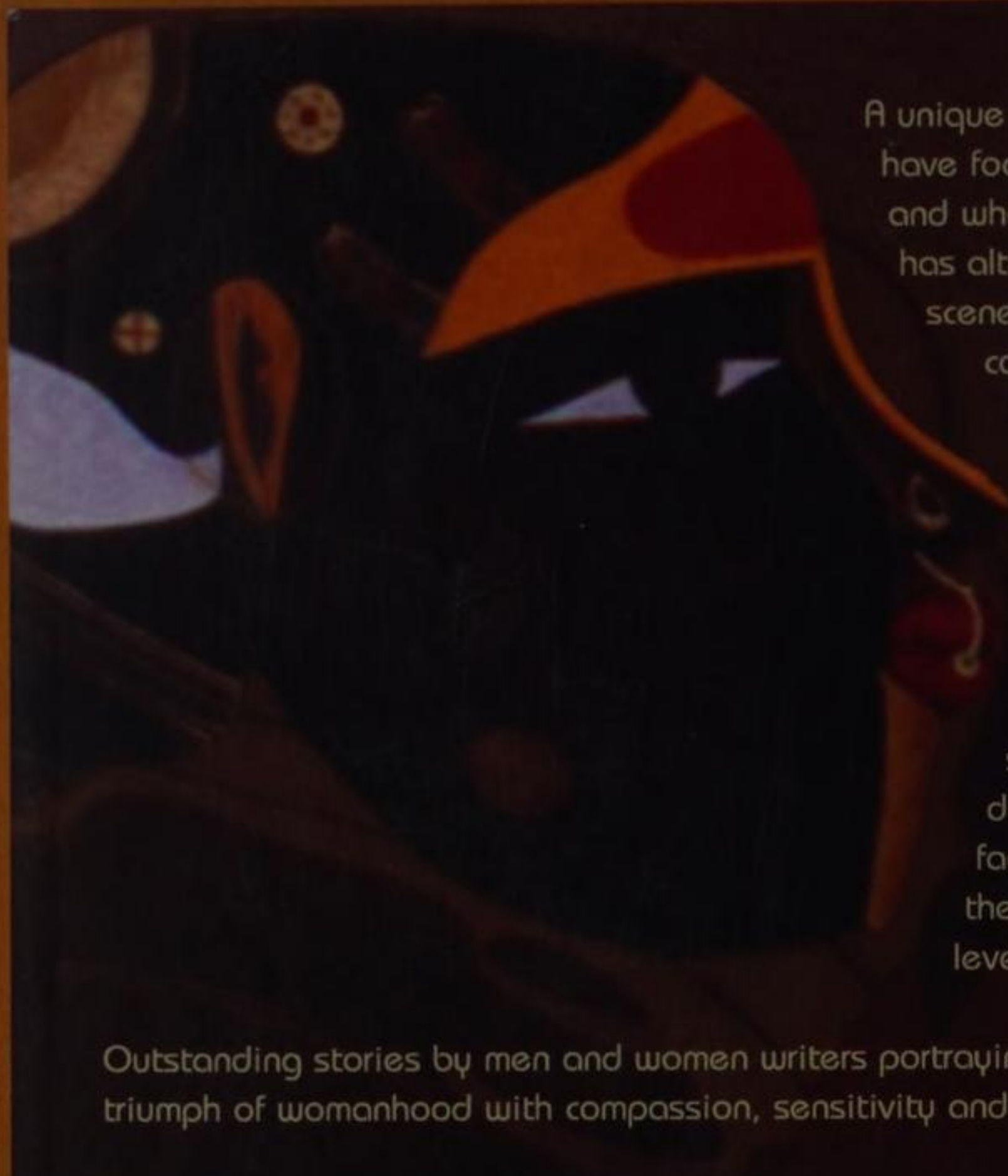

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